



# **Violence against Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Trans People in Iran**

Submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women  
Annual Communications Procedure

August 1, 2015

**Presented by:**

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission

## Introduction

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) is a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. IGLHRC works with activists throughout the world to advocate to end discrimination and abuse on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression (SOGIE).

IGLHRC is submitting this communication, along with six others, to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) through its annual communications procedure. IGLHRC strongly urges the CSW to identify violence against lesbians, bisexual women, and trans individuals (LBT) people as an emerging trend and formulate appropriate policy responses.

In the upcoming months, IGLHRC's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Program will be releasing a comprehensive report on violence against LBT people in Iran, a product of over two years of original research and documentation. Highlighting many of the report's main findings, this communication includes 7 case studies of LBT individuals who have recently faced violence in Iran. IGLHRC trusts that the CSW will find the information in this communication useful in its efforts to promote global gender equality.

Due to a host of safety and privacy concerns, this communication uses pseudonyms for the victims mentioned. Many do not want the media, their government, communities, and/or families to know of their participation in the research project for fear of retribution. Many are not open about their gender identities and/or sexual orientations and wish to maintain their privacy to avoid further violence. Many victims who experience violence within the private sphere wish to remain anonymous to avoid public exposure of their families and intimate relationships. All names and information are on file with IGLHRC. Please contact us if you have any questions regarding the cases mentioned.

The need for this precaution further highlights the urgency of our petition. LBT people often are compelled to remain invisible to avoid further violence. As a result, violence against them remains severely under-documented and is largely overlooked by state governments and nongovernmental organizations.

## Definitions

The *Basij* is a paramilitary volunteer militia in Iran that acts as the eyes and ears of the Islamic regime. It is present in schools, universities, state and private institutions, factories, and even tribes. It is often referred to as the "morality police."

**Bi/bisexual** people have sexual and romantic desires for both females and males.

**Cis/cisgender** people are individuals whose gender identity matches their birth sex.

**Coming out** is the process of revealing one's SOGIE to other people.

**FtM/transmen** are female-to-male (FTM) transgender or transsexual people who were assigned female at birth but identify as a male.<sup>1</sup>

**Gender expression** refers to the ways people choose to express their gender. Some common mediums of gender expression include choices in hairstyle, clothing, behavior, speech, and gestures.

**Lesbians** are women who have sexual and romantic desires for other women.

**MtF/transwomen** are male-to-female (MTF) transgender or transsexual people who were assigned male at birth but identify as female.

**SOGIE** stands for sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

**SRS** stands for sex reassignment surgery, the surgical procedure(s) by which a transgender person's physical appearance and function of their existing sexual characteristics are altered to resemble that of their identified sex.

**Trans/transgender** people are individuals whose gender identity does not match their birth sex.

**Violence**, as defined by the World Health Organization's (WHO) World Report on Violence and Health, is "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual...that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury...psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation."<sup>2</sup> This communication uses two analytical categories to examine violence:

1) Forms of Violence

- a) **Emotional violence** refers to mental and psychological abuse. Actions and behaviors that constitute emotional violence in this research are verbal abuse (e.g., insults, taunts, allegations of

---

<sup>1</sup> Even though FtM individuals do not identify as women, IGLHRC strongly recommends that CSW consider cases of FtM individuals in its efforts to promote gender equality. Some of the most ignored in the LGBTIQ+ community, FtM individuals often experience severe violence because they are often perceived as women who need to be punished and converted. No other UN organization serves to promote their gender rights.

<sup>2</sup> While homicide is considered violence, we exclude it from our research because it is outside of the scope of our study. Suicide or attempted suicide is considered an impact of violence in this study.

abnormality, etc.); threats (e.g., to disclose SOGIE to others, abandon, evict, imprison, harm self or others, etc.); controlling actions (e.g., restricting interactions, invading privacy, monitoring communication, etc.); silent hostility (e.g., non-verbal behaviors that express contempt, denial, or rejection of a person's SOGIE); neglect (e.g., withholding financial support, denying medical treatment, etc.); and discrimination (e.g., employment discrimination, refusal of access to gendered facilities, etc.).

- b) **Physical violence** involves bodily harm. Examples include battery (e.g., beating, hair-pulling, throttling, kicking, pushing, burning, tying-up, head-butting, etc.); physical confinement and imprisonment; deprivation of basic necessities (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, etc.); forced electro-shock therapy; assault; and more.
- c) **Sexual violence**, according to WHO, is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comments or advances...using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim.” Examples of sexual violence include threats to rape, forcibly showing sexual images, unwanted sexual touching, and more.

## 2) Sites of Violence

- a) The most common site of violence against LBT people is the **private sphere**: households, families, intimate relationships, and tightknit communities. From a policy perspective, violence in the private sphere is difficult to combat because many perceive it to be a private matter without need for state protection or redress.
- b) Both State and non-State actors perpetuate violence in the **public sphere**. Examples of the former include violence by State institutions (police, courts, jails, etc.) and violence facilitated by State policies, such as endorsement of harmful religious or cultural practices. The latter primarily refers to violence by passers-by in public or open spaces (i.e. streets, public transportation facilities, stores, restaurants, etc.), neighbors, members of ethnic and religious communities, co-workers and bosses, and classmates.

## Case Studies

At the time of interview, **Fariba** was a 25 year-old lesbian who had lived in Tehran, Iran until 2011. At age 14, Fariba married her 32 year-old cousin even though she was not attracted to him. Under the impression that this could be “fixed,” Fariba consulted several mental health professions during her marriage. Some prescribed her medications that would supposedly increase her sexual

desire for her husband. A few years into the marriage, Fariba began refusing to her husband's requests for sex. Outraged, he responded by screaming at, beating, and raping her. They eventually agreed to a divorce.

Ever since, Fariba's parents have hardly communicated with her. They blame her for the divorce, insisting that she had the "best" husband. Fariba's brothers started strictly monitoring her movement, prohibiting her from spending time with friends. As a result, Fariba completely isolated herself, locking herself in her room for multiple continuous days and nights.

A traditional Muslim, Fariba had a difficult time accepting her non-conforming sexual orientation. When she began a relationship with another woman, Fariba felt extremely guilty, and, for a while, tried to convince her partner to receive sex reassignment surgery. Fariba's mother was alarmed when she learned of the relationship, warning Fariba that Fariba's father would surely kill Fariba.

In 2010, Fariba and her girlfriend held a commitment ceremony at a house in Northern Iran to exchange rings and celebrate their love for one another. Receiving a noise complaint, police officers and soldiers barged into the house, seized pictures and videos of Fariba and her partner kissing and exchanging rings without a search warrant, called them "whores," and arrested them.

Not given access to legal advice prior to investigations, Fariba and her partner were not aware that lesbianism (having lesbian intercourse) is illegal under the Iranian penal code. Assuring Fariba and her partner that they would help the two with their case if they cooperated, investigators manipulated them into signing a lesbianism confession four times – the number of confessions required for conviction. In poor health at the time and feeling extremely anxious, Fariba did not read the document prior to signing.

The night before their trial, Fariba and her partner were taken to prison. Guards taunted the two, pressured them to undress in front of other prisoners, and one even said that she would stone Fariba with her own hands. The guards forced Fariba and her partner to sleep in a hallway and monitored them using a hidden camera. They caught Fariba's partner comforting Fariba, who was feeling extremely scared, by caressing and kissing her. The guards barged into the hallway, beat the two, dragged them into the prison yard, chained them to exercise equipment, and forced them to stand in cold sewage water. When Fariba and her partner felt too tired to stand, they sat in the sewage water. To this day, touching cold water brings Fariba painful flashbacks of this incident.

The next morning, Fariba and her partner were taken to court and sentenced with 100 lashes each for their confessions to lesbianism. They also received an additional 100 lashes each because of their intimacy the night prior. The judge told Fariba and her partner, "You people should all be killed so your offspring would be eliminated from this planet." Fariba passed out from pain halfway

through her lashes. She and her partner both suffered through a severe fever and clothing stuck to their wounds for many days.

Fariba was in prison for the next ten months. Other prisoners cursed at Fariba, called her “unclean” and a “pervert,” and attempted to rape her partner. When guards caught Fariba and her partner kissing again, they transferred Fariba’s partner to another prison, absolutely devastating Fariba.

Fariba feels that her lawyers have cheated her. None of her lawyers ever outlined her charges to her. In attempt to extort money from Fariba, one tried to convince her that she needed additional services to avoid execution, even though she now knows that lesbianism is not punishable by death in Iran. At the time, this comment deeply frightened Fariba and caused her to have nightmares of her being stoned.

One social worker pressured Fariba to invite her family to a court hearing. Her father and brothers attended and started beating Fariba in the court, leaving her unconscious on the ground. Her father told her that he should have killed Fariba when she got divorced – that he should have “ended [her] right then and there.” A state official at the courthouse told Fariba’s father that he had the right to kill her at the courthouse because Fariba had “dishonored Islam.” While police officers tried to calm Fariba’s father and the court was in heavy commotion, Fariba was able to escape and take a taxi to Tehran. Fortunately, she was able to escape Iran in 2011.

*Interviewed on June 14, 2013.*

At the time of interview, **Zahra** was a 32-year old transwoman who had lived in Iran until 2008. Zahra’s family members have pressured her to not pluck her eyebrows, referred to her as an “embarrassment” to their family, and told her they wished she would “drop dead.” Her sister and her sister’s husband pressured Zahra into consuming herbal substances that would supposedly “cure” her. Her sister once took Zahra to a shrink, who told Zahra to “fix” herself or she would end up a prostitute. Zahra’s father’s friends taunted her father, insisting that Zahra would become a sex worker.

In her Tehran secondary school, Zahra’s religious studies teacher slapped her for “arousing” and “stimulating” other students, even though Zahra hardly interacted with her classmates. Because of this harassment, Zahra transferred schools. At her new school, also in Tehran, students teased her, called her names, spit on her back, burned her with matches, pushed her, beat her, forced her to kiss them, and touched her genitals. When Zahra complained to administrators, they told her that she “deserved [this violence] for filing the corners of her nails.”

The *Basij*, the Islamic morality police, harassed Zahra twice as she was walking in her neighborhood. They pushed her against walls and demanded to know why

she dressed femininely. When Zahra sought to receive an exemption from the Army on the basis of her gender identity, soldiers scowled at her, offered their numbers to her, and tried to “pick her up.” Zahra felt that this experience was “humiliating” and “torturous.”

Because of the violence she’s faced, Zahra has prayed to die in her sleep.

*Interviewed on June 15, 2013.*

At the time of interview, **Sepideh** was a 33 year-old lesbian woman who had lived in Iran until 2012. In university, Sepideh’s classmates often gossiped about her sexual orientation behind her back. The president of her university once summoned her to tell her that she needed to be psychologically evaluated. On another occasion, the president threatened to remove Sepideh from the university basketball team because of her sexual orientation.

One time, a parking lot attendant caught Sepideh and her partner kissing near their car outside of a restaurant in Northwest Tehran. He started screaming at them, telling them that they are “dirty homosexuals”; have “sexual problems”; and are “sexual perverts.” Bystanders started gathering around them, siding with the attendant, and one called the police. Luckily, Sepideh and her partner knew the restaurant owner well, and he was able to convince the police officers not to arrest them.

Sepideh and her partner lived in an apartment in Northwest Tehran. Cisgender male neighbors often knocked on their door, threatening to report them to the police for being lesbians. Passers-by often stared at Zahra and her partner as if they were “sick or crazy.”

*Interviewed on June 15, 2013.*

At the time of interview, **Niloofer** was a 32 year-old MtF lesbian who had lived in Iran until 2010. Niloofer’s family does not accept her gender identity or sexual orientation. Her father believes that she is a “lost cause.” Her brothers mocked her for having mostly female friends and told her that she “disgusts” them. They beat her throughout her childhood and teenage years, 5-6 times a week, leaving Niloofer a multitude of marks, bruises, and scars. One of her brothers even rubbed his genitals against her on several occasions. As a result of the violence she’s faced at home, Niloofer suffers from severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

When Niloofer was 16, one of her brothers grabbed her neck and pinched it so hard that it started bleeding. She went to a local police station to report the incident. Even after Niloofer showed her bloody neck, the police officer she spoke with ignored her complaints, saying that it would be immoral to press charges

against her own family. A woman who was waiting in line behind Niloofar told her to “get out.”

Niloofar’s psychologist disapproved of Niloofar’s complex sexual orientation and gender identity, telling her that she didn’t understand why Niloofar would want to transition if she were already attracted to women. At age 23, when Niloofar told her friend that she was considering transitioning, her friend told Niloofar that she was “poisoning [her] mind.”

Niloofar faced emotional violence while she attended university. Her classmates often teased her for speaking and walking femininely, making her feel anxious. When she was smoking hookah, some classmates harassed her by likening her hookah pipe to a penis. The head of the Islamic Association of the university once summoned Niloofar and told her that he would “punch [her] teeth out.” Niloofar never sought redress because she was certain that the administration would only mock her further and make her life more miserable.

To escape violence at home, Niloofar moved into her grandmother’s house when she was in her second year of her under-graduate education. Her grandmother was extremely hostile of Niloofar’s nonconformity and screamed at her violently on a daily basis. As a result, Niloofar had several mental breakdowns and was hospitalized.

*Interviewed on June 15, 2013.*

At the time of interview, **Omid** was a 28 year-old transman who had lived in Iran until 2013. In 2010, Omid stopped covering his hair in public. That year, morality police officers shoved Omid to the ground at Vanak Square and arrested him for not wearing a hijab. They refused to believe that Omid was a man, pointing to his feminine features at the time as justification.

Also in 2010, Omid began an almost two-year process of applying for state permission to transition. Coming from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, Omid had a difficult time financing the costs of various state-mandated counseling sessions and exams. In one exam, Omid was diagnosed as an alcoholic with “abnormal problems.” Omid does not drink alcohol and found this extremely disturbing.

In 2012, Omid finally obtained permission to transition. Because his insurance plan did not cover sex reassignment surgeries (SRS), Omid’s options for SRS surgeons were limited. The only surgeons within his price range had extremely poor reputations, often known to “butcher” and deform trans bodies. Some of these surgeons’ former clients had to undergo multiple follow-up surgeries before they felt comfortable with their bodies. Unable to afford adequate SRS, Omid did not fully transition in Iran.

Omid's family does not approve of his intention to transition. His mother held his identification card from him in an attempt to prevent him from receiving a new birth certificate with a male name and told him that wished he were dead. Omid's brother violently beat him on several occasions. Omid's mother, brother, and sister filed a legal complaint against Omid, arguing that he is too "delusional" to be allowed to transition.

To escape violence, Omid fled Iran in 2013.

*Interviewed on July 15, 2013.*

At the time of interview, **Reza** was a 20 year-old transman who had lived in Iran until 2011. After hearing that a psychologist recommended SRS to Reza, Reza's father beat Reza, telling him that the doctor's advice was "garbage" and that if Reza ever spoke of SRS he would kill himself. Encouraged by Reza's uncles, Reza's father beat Reza daily for dressing in masculine clothing. He also Reza's tried to sabotage Reza's relationships with women on a number of occasions. Passers-by have made extremely offensive comments to Reza, including asking him if he "even [has] a dick to fuck his girlfriends."

When Reza was 18, his father caught him kissing a woman in his bedroom. He beat both Reza and the woman severely and told Reza that he would "straighten him out." He withheld Reza's cell phone and computer from him and prohibited Reza from leaving their house for about a year, delaying his higher education. To cope with the violence faced during this period, Reza cut his wrists and attempted suicide twice.

When Reza was 19, his father finally permitted him to attend university, on the condition that Reza agreed to marry a male cousin after completing his studies. At university, *Basij* (morality police) stopped and questioned Reza when he was walking home with a girl at nighttime. They demanded to see Reza's identification card, which listed him as a female, and arrested him for "indecent exposure and not wearing female attire."

While he was in custody, officers touched Reza inappropriately, called him extremely offensive names, and told him he was the reason for Iran's social problems. One officer felt his genitals in an attempt to determine his sex. After promising not to dress masculine again and not to have sexual relations with women, Reza was released.

To avoid this having to marry his male cousin and to escape the violence he has experienced with on the basis of his gender identity, Reza fled Iran in 2011.

*Interviewed on September 8, 2012.*

At the time of interview, **Afsaneh** was a 52 year-old transwoman. Afsaneh has been arrested by police officers on the road on many occasions for dressing femininely. When she was arrested in Tabriz in 2005, police officers cursed at her, forcefully pulled her headband off, stripped her, punched and kicked her, called her a “no-life” and a *kuni* (an extremely derogatory word for effeminate men), did not feed her for two days, and accused her of abducting and killing women. In jail, inmates harassed Afsaneh, asking her prying questions regarding her gender identity and expression, such as “Why do you dress this way?” and “Why do you pluck your eyebrows?”. One inmate made sexual advances onto Afsaneh. In interrogations, investigators blindfolded her and forced her to sign a document, banging her head against the wall when she resisted. To this day, she does not know what she signed.

Afsaneh was never given access to legal services. Only three minutes into her court hearing, the judge sentenced her with thirty lashes, assuring her that these would “heal” her. The lashes left severe bruises throughout Afsaneh’s body.

After the government granted Afsaneh permission to transition, she had a difficult time financing adequate-quality SRS. She obtained a partial procedure with a reputable, Tehran-based surgeon but was not able to afford a full surgery from him. Instead, she obtained an inadequate procedure from a cheaper surgeon that left her with a severe infection and without a fully constructed vagina. To this day, Afsaneh feels pain when she opens her legs, is too embarrassed to have sex with intimate partners, and feels that her genitalia is “disgusting.”

Ever since Afsaneh received this operation, her family has refused to communicate with her. When Afsaneh’s was working as a maid, her employer discovered she was trans and fired her. Because of the violence she has faced, Afsaneh attempted suicide on multiple occasions.

*Interviewed on June 14, 2013.*