



Violence against Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Trans People in Pakistan

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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 May 2014, IGLHRC's Asia and the Pacific Islands Program released a report, *Violence: Through the Lens of Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Trans People in Asia* (The IGLHRC Asia report). A product of over two years of research by regional women's, gender, and sexual rights activists and over 370 interviews with LBT people and stakeholders, the report documents and examines violence directed towards LBT people in Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. A copy of the full report is available at this link: http://iglhrc.org/sites/iglhrc.org/files/LBT_ForUpload0614.pdf.

From 2010 to 2012, the Organization for the Protection and Propagation of the Rights of Sexual Minorities (O), a Lahore-based LGBTQ empowerment organization, interviewed 41 LBT people in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Multan to document their experiences with violence. Prior to this project, no comprehensive documentation of violence against LBT people in Pakistan existed. Highlighting O's main findings, this communication includes 15 case studies of violence against LBT people in Pakistan.

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.

Because the IGLHRC Asia report focuses on broad trends of violence against LBT people, many specific contextual details of our case studies, including exact times and dates of violent incidents, were not documented. Interviewers were primarily concerned

with understanding the nuances of violence experienced by their respondents, including its overlapping forms and manifestations, root causes, and lasting effects on victims. All respondents have experienced violence multiple times in their lives; exclusive focus on an individual perpetrator or incident would have limited and flattened our analysis. Given the dearth of documentation of violence against LBT people in Pakistan, IGLHRC trusts that the CSW will find the information in this communication useful in its efforts to promote global gender equality.

Definitions

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.¹

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.

Khawajasaras are trans people who may have been born male-bodied or, occasionally, intersex, but identify as women or people with feminine traits. *Khawajasaras*, also known as *Hijras*, have been part of South Asian society for about 400 years.

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

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

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

¹ 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.

harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.”² This communication refers to 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 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 in the **private sphere**: households, families, intimate relationships, and tightknit communities. From a policy perspective, violence in the private sphere is particularly difficult to reduce 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, immigration authorities, courts, welfare departments, passport control centers, educational centers, 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,

² 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.

etc.), neighbors, members of ethnic and religious communities, co-workers and bosses, and classmates.

Violence against LBT People in Pakistan: At a Glance

Often justified with reference to religion (including Islam), Pakistani society enforces gender-differential treatment in all spheres. Female independence, especially gender nonconformity and sexual autonomy, is strongly discouraged. LBT people challenge these norms and are thus highly susceptible to various manifestations of violence, including intimate partner violence; police brutality; passer-by harassment; rejection by loved ones; and more.

The family is the most common source of violence against LBT people in Pakistan. Family members often emotionally abuse LBT children and young people by monitoring their movement; forcing them into arranged heterosexual marriages; verbally abusing and teasing them; ignoring them; pressuring them to meet religious leaders and mental health professionals to be “corrected”; disproving of their non-conforming SOGIE; and more. Many respondents indicated that family members physically and sexually abused them as well. There are no state institutions, such as LBT-friendly shelters, that could provide support to LBT people who escape their families.³

Emotional violence was the most widely reported form of violence against LBT people in Pakistan. It occurs in both the public and private spheres, usually intensifies over time, and often precedes physical and/or sexual violence.

State laws are hostile towards people with non-conforming sexual orientations, gender identity, and gender expression. Section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code criminalizes “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” which is interpreted to include anal sex.⁴ Additionally, Section 294, regulating “obscene dance and drugs,” and Section 295, an anti-blasphemy law, both make many LBT people vulnerable to police abuses.⁵ Section 295 even provides opportunity for community violence, such as individual vigilante attacks or mob violence, in the name of religion.⁶ The 2010 Protection Against Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act has not been used to protect LBT people.⁷

³ O Pakistan, “Where I Can Actually Be Me: Experiences of Violence and Discrimination,” *IGLHRC Asia Report*, Page 159.

⁴ Section 377, Pakistan Penal Code, <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html>.

⁵ O Pakistan, “Where I Can Actually Be Me: Experiences of Violence and Discrimination,” *IGLHRC Asia Report*, Page 158.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 159.

Case Studies

At the time of interview, **Sherry** was a 22 year-old bisexual woman primarily attracted to women living in Pakistan. When Sherry was 16, her family pressured her into an engagement with her first cousin. She had a difficult time feeling attracted to him, and, as a result, did not marry him. Upon learning that Sherry was a bisexual, this ex-fiancée pressured Sherry into seeing a doctor to “cure” her. When she was 17, Sherry’s father forced her into a marriage with a different man. When Sherry refused to have sex with her husband, he called her “abnormal” and violently beat her. She obtained a divorce.

Sherry’s family was infuriated that Sherry separated from her arranged partners, feeling that these actions were extremely disrespectful. To punish her, Sherry’s father, brother, and uncles cursed at Sherry, closely monitored her movements, beat her, and locked her in her room for three months. Sherry says that these experiences made her feel “tortured.” One time, when Sherry’s brother was particularly violent, Sherry reported him to the police. Furious that Sherry reported her brother, Sherry’s mother ceased communicating with her, ripped her clothing apart, and broke her electronics.

Sherry has yet come out to her father, a traditional Muslim, because she feels certain that he would kill her. When she came out to some cousins, many criticized her for not abiding by Islamic norms and called her “sinful.” Many friends disapprove of Sherry’s sexuality, telling Sherry that she is “disgusting”; “pretending to be something she is not” and just trying to “show off.” These comments make Sherry feel “humiliated.”

When Sherry was 19, men sent her sexually explicit images online and asked to watch Sherry have sex with her girlfriend. Sherry says that most men think of lesbians and bisexual women as “whores.”

Interviewed on December 13, 2010.

At the time of interview, **Nadia** was a 27 year-old Arain lesbian living in Southern Punjab. Nadia has received considerable pressure from her family, especially her eldest brother, to obtain a husband and conform to gender expectations. She has not come out to her family, coworkers, or neighbors out of fear of rejection, causing her great emotional distress. She is forced to constantly alternate between two personalities: one that conforms to societal expectations and another, which Nadia says is her “true self.”

Interviewed on January 19, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Sana** was a 28 year-old Punjabi woman living in Lahore, Pakistan. Sana says that she is “gender neutral” and is mostly attracted to women. Sana’s parents have had trouble coping with her sexual orientation. When she came out to them, they expressed stern disapproval, telling Sana that she was disregarding her duties to her family by not conforming to gender expectations. In order to avoid

employment discrimination and violence in the public sphere, Sana is forced to hide her sexuality and current long-term relationship from most people.

Interviewed on February 26, 2011.

Amber is a self-identified *khwajasara* sex worker living in Karachi. Passers-by on the streets often throw banana peels at her, emotionally abuse her with abusive comments, make harmful jokes about her gender identity, undress her, rob her, and beat her. Police officers often beat her and other *khwajasaras* with sticks, slap them, and kick them. On some instances, police officers “pimped” Amber: they found clients for her and kept her clients’ payments for themselves. Amber has accepted extreme police brutality as “part of the package of being in this field.”

Interviewed in 2011.

At the time of interview, **Angeline** was a 25 year-old lesbian living in Lahore. In 2010, when Angeline’s extended family learned of Angeline’s relationship with another woman, they threatened to beat both her and her partner and to publically reveal their relationship. Lasting for several months, these threats caused Angeline to suffer from a severe depression and to have suicidal thoughts. In addition, her family placed her under strict surveillance, prohibiting her from leaving the house alone and monitoring her calls and text messages.

Angeline worked in a beauty salon in Dubai for several months when she had guest worker status in the United Arab Emirates. When her supervisor’s husband discovered that she was a lesbian, he threatened to physically and sexually abuse her. When she tried to return back to Pakistan, he did not allow her to leave until she paid him a large sum of money. She was only able to return to home country because a Pakistan-based LGBTI organization agreed to pay the money demanded by her boss’s husband.

Interviewed on February 5, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Pappu** was a 55 year-old self-identified *khwajasara* living near Vehari. Pappu’s parents sternly disapproved of Pappu’s gender identity and abandoned her at the age of 12. Passers-by constantly harass Pappu by calling her derogatory names and catcalling at her. Some have attempted to sexually assault her on multiple occasions, making her feel extremely unsafe. Employers refuse to hire her due to her gender identity. As a result, Pappu had no choice but to become a beggar.

Interviewed on June 2, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Anam** was a 21 year-old masculine Punjabi lesbian living in Lahore. From age 13 to 17, classmates at Anam’s secondary school teased and verbally

attacked her for not conforming to traditional standards of femininity. This bullying deeply troubled Anam and caused her academic performance to suffer. During this period, she received no support from teachers or other authority figures.

Anam's family members closely supervise her when she is in public, do not allow her to drive a vehicle, and criticize her for wearing masculine clothing. Anam has not come out to her parents, feeling certain that they would disown her and potentially harm her if they knew of her non-conforming sexual orientation. Because she must hide her identity, Anam often feels invisibilized and depressed.

Interviewed on March 4, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Shaheen** was a 40 year-old lesbian living in Karachi. When Shaheen's mother caught her being intimate with her girlfriend, she threatened to burn her genitals with an iron. Following this incident, she did not permit Shaheen to close her bedroom door when Shaheen had friends over and prohibited Shaheen from bringing certain friends home. Some of Shaheen's friends ceased communicating with her after she came out to them.

Shaheen was pressured into a marriage with a man. When she was 20, her husband severely abused her on a daily basis. The details of this violence were too painful to recall that Shaheen directly told her interviewer, "I do not want to go into detail, but he violated me emotionally, physically, and sexually."

In July 2011, Shaheen was invited to the US Embassy in Islamabad's LGBT pride celebration. Publicized in a press release on the Embassy's website, the celebration led to an outcry from religious conservatives and certain political parties in Pakistan.⁸ Shaheen deeply feared that her name would be released, leaving her vulnerable to violence and rape from extremists.

Shaheen hopes to leave Pakistan and live in a country where she can walk down the street holding her partner's hand without worrying for her life.

Interviewed on November 19, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Maryam** was a 27 year-old lesbian living in Islamabad. When Maryam came out to her family at age 16, one of her uncles responded disapprovingly and verbally abused her for months. Currently a business owner, Maryam has not come out to her staff members, fearing that doing so would have negative repercussions for her business. It deeply troubles Maryam that she must hide an important aspect of her identity at her job. Maryam assumes that she will need to immigrate to Canada or the

⁸ "US Embassy in Islamabad Accused of 'Cultural' Terrorism For Holding Gay Rights Event," *Fridae*, July 4, 2011, <http://www.fridae.asia/newsfeatures/2011/07/04/10982.us-embassy-in-islamabad-accused-of-cultural-terrorism-for-hosting-gay-rights-event>.

United States because of the low level of opportunity for women, especially lesbians, in Pakistan.

Interviewed on October 23, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Summer** was a 31 year-old bisexual woman. When Summer came out to one of her best friends, she told Summer that bisexuality is wrong and sinful. When she came out to her father, he was infuriated and harassed her emotionally for several years, pressuring her to marry a man and to keep her sexuality hidden. He was even convinced that Summer's mother sexually abused Summer, causing her bisexuality. In 2008, Summer's partner's uncle threatened to expose her sexual orientation publically multiple times. He verbally attacked her, calling her extremely offensive slurs.

Summer suffered depression for most of the last ten years and has had suicidal thoughts. To cope with the violence she's faced, Summer became a heavy drinker.

Interviewed on February 25, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Victoria** was a 22 year-old lesbian who had lived in Lahore until 2010. Both Victoria and her girlfriend's families do not accept their relationship. After learning of her sexuality in 2010, Victoria's family began forcing her to meet with Islamic religious teachers, hoping that they would "convince" her to become straight. As recently as one week prior to the interview, Victoria's girlfriend's mother scolded Victoria and her girlfriend for being lesbians. When Victoria's girlfriend's family members learned that Victoria and her girlfriend planned to leave Pakistan to start a life together, they locked Victoria's girlfriend in their house and prohibited her from obtaining a passport.

To cope with feeling rejected from her family and Victoria's family, Victoria occasionally uses drugs. She suffers from depression and has had suicidal thoughts.

Interviewed in 2011.

At the time of interview, **Mari** was a 29 year-old transman living in Lahore. Mari has not come out to his immediate family, fearing rejection. When he came out to some extended family members, they made transphobic comments, saying that his SOGIE is not "right" and forced Mari to see a psychiatrist to "cure" him. Since Mari came out to many of his work colleagues two years ago, he has endured daily verbal attacks in the form of lewd comments and harmful questions about his gender identity.

Interviewed on May 24, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Sara** was a 49-year-old masculine bisexual woman. Passers-by often address Sara as a man, deeply offending her. One of Sarah's sisters repeatedly taunts her for having a non-conforming sexual orientation.

Sara came out to her now ex-husband during a marriage counseling session about two years ago. He became infuriated and started violently yelling at Sarah and threatening to beat her. During the divorce process, her ex-husband continued to threaten both Sarah and her girlfriend, making them feel extremely unsafe. One of Sarah's friend's husbands also threatened to harm Sarah, falsely believing that Sarah was "influencing" his wife to become a lesbian and having an affair with her. As a result of these threats, Sarah and her girlfriend live in constant fear.

Interviewed on January 27, 2011.

At the time of interview, **Natasha** was a 24 year-old lesbian who recently moved to Canada. When Natasha came out to her mother when she was 18, her mother was infuriated. She attempted "explain away" Natasha's sexuality with "junk psychology," claiming that she was only a lesbian because of problems in childhood. Soon after she came out, her mother made an active effort to discourage Natasha from seeing her partner.

Natasha does not disclose her sexuality to most people in order to avoid violence. Passers-by often make extremely homophobic comments to her, including "all gays should be killed" and "homosexuality is a mental illness." Some pinch her and touch her inappropriately. Because of these occurrences, Natasha nearly always feels threatened while she is in Pakistan.

Interviewed on March 4, 2012.

At the time of interview, **Monica** was a 22 year-old self-identified *khwajasara* living in Lahore. When Monica came out to her family members in her teenage years, they were in denial and tried to convince being a *khwajasara* is "abnormal" and "wrong." Relatives and extended family often cursed Monica, prayed that God would damn her, and pressured Monica's mother to make Monica into a "proper" cisgender male again. Monica had a difficult time coping with her family's negative reaction.

Monica also experiences violence and discrimination in the public sphere. She avoids travelling in buses because of their gender-segregated compartments. As she puts it, "When I enter the women's section, they say that I am not a woman so I should leave. When I enter the men's section, they joke and ask me to leave also." As a result, Monica must commute using rickshaws, which are more expensive than public buses and a heavy financial burden. Monica does not seek medical services at government hospitals because doctors and patients often glare at her, curse at her, and make loaded comments. She is thus forced to only consult only *khwajasara*-friendly private doctors and clinics, which are more expensive. Street passers-by regularly make lewd and

derogatory comments to Monica and sexually harass her with unwanted touching and grabbing.

Once, when Monica was hired as a dancer at a party, she was gang-raped by a group of men. Other *khwajasara* performers at the party watched the rape and did not do anything to protect Monica. When she consulted another *khwajasara* dancer, she apathetically told Monica that it is “quite normal and usual to get raped by men in such parties.” This incident left her feeling “helpless,” “angry,” and “sad.”

As a result of the violence she has faced, Monica has suffered from depression.

Interviewed in 2011.