

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1020
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	BBC News
Titel:	Iran protests: LGBTQ community rises up
Udgivet:	19. april 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	18. september 2023

Iran protests: LGBTQ community rises up

- Published
🕒 19 April

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What trailblazing Iranian LGBTQ visibility means to me

By Khosro Kalbasi Isfahani
BBC Monitoring

"Are you a degenerate," asked the security officer interrogating a young bisexual woman arrested during the recent anti-government protests in Iran.

The interrogator had searched the woman's phone and come across her intimate conversations with her girlfriend.

Warning: This article contains language that some readers may find offensive.

"What the hell are these chats? Are you a degenerate?" repeated the interrogator, his voice laced with disgust and using an offensive and derogatory Persian word which describes any form of same-sex attraction.

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Now out of prison on bail, the woman, who is in her 20s, tells the BBC that she dodged the question by describing the conversation as "jokes that are common between girls".

She says that the officer appeared to be focused on pressing charges related to the protests and therefore did not pursue the allegations of homosexuality.

Iranian law, which is based on Sharia, considers same-sex relations as crimes that carry a maximum penalty of death.

"But he kept pounding me with that question: 'Are you a degenerate?' He also mentioned my girlfriend's name here and there, asking questions about her sexuality," she says.

She had planned to make a rainbow-coloured LGBTQ Pride flag and take it to protests. "But I got arrested and a lot has happened since," she says.

Pointing to the defiant spirit of the younger generations in Iran, she says that it came as no surprise that the LGBTQ community was "more visible during the recent protests", especially since the movement "has roots in the struggle for human rights".

In her opinion, this displays "unparalleled courage" of the younger generations and the gulf between them and the top echelons of the Islamic Republic, many of whom are now in their 80s.

"This generation does not bend before barbaric laws and norms. It is bent on consistently remaining true to itself. It stands tall and demands recognition."

The protests swept across the country following the death in custody in September of Mahsa Amini, a young ethnic Kurdish woman who was detained by morality police for allegedly wearing her hijab "improperly".

The Islamic Republic has responded with deadly force.

According to the Human Rights Activists' News Agency (HRANA), security forces have killed at least 530 protesters - including 71 children - since the protests began. Four men have been executed on protest-related charges following trials that the UN says were unfair and based on forced confessions. Dozens of others who have been convicted are at risk of execution.

'Queer, Life, Freedom'

During the protest movement, young LGBTQ people have defied the regime's bans on public shows of affection and same-sex intimacy by removing their hijab and kissing each other in public.

Others have taken to streets with placards in the colours of the Pride and trans flags, reading "Woman, Life, Freedom" - the de facto slogan of the protest movement - as well as "Queer, Life, Freedom".

Queer is an offensive word to some, but for others it is the preferred term to describe their sexual orientation or gender identity.



Image source, BBC Monitoring

Image caption,

A young LGBTQ person holds up a trans flag reading "#queer - life - freedom"

Photos have shown activists spray-painting pro-LGBTQ slogans on walls at universities and in parks, including: "Queer, Trans, Freedom", "The LGBTQ community rises", and "This is the voice of the LGBTQ community: liberation or setting the night on fire".

Others have handed out flyers to people on the streets that are hand-painted in the colours of the Pride flag and read: "The Iranian LGBTQ family stands by you."

Many Iranians on social media have warmly welcomed the increased visibility of the LGBTQ community. Yet the move has triggered a backlash from others.

In addition to the outright homophobic reactions, an old question has resurfaced: "Is it the 'right time' to speak of LGBTQ rights in Iran?"

Similar questions have reverberated through Iran's modern history whenever marginalised groups have demanded rights.

"Is this the right time for that?" was used by many political parties to gag feminists when thousands protested against the introduction of the mandatory hijab rules following the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

'We are countless'

Afsaneh Rigot, a researcher in technology, law and human rights at Harvard University, says: "Seen globally, queer people in Iran face some of the harshest penalties for their existence."

"They are also criminalised in multiple ways, not only under oppressive laws generally criminalising freedom of expression on and offline, but also laws directly criminalising their identities," she adds.

These include wearing clothes considered female if a person is recorded as male at birth.

Other same-sex acts that are criminalised include same-sex "kissing or touching as a result of lust" and are punishable by flogging. These penalties also apply to children under the age of 18.

A trans non-binary activist in Iran in their early 20s, who say they are defying pressure from the "guardians of cis-heteronormativity", describe the increased visibility of the LGBTQ community as the "rainbow wave".

They also note that in response, top officials of the Islamic Republic are intensifying their homophobic rhetoric.

In a speech in Tehran on the anniversary of the revolution on 11 February, President Ebrahim Raisi accused the West of "exploiting women" under the pretext of human rights.

He said those countries were in no place to "set norms for the world, since they are pushing humanity towards the brink of extinction by promoting immoral behaviour like homosexuality".

Despite all the headwinds, Iran's LGBTQ community is determined to not be pushed back into the closet again.

Recently, dozens helped a gay beauty blogger make a video collage in which each of them repeated a single sentence: "We are countless."

The BBC has withheld the identities of some of the people quoted in this article for their own safety.

Note 3 May 2023: This article was amended to make clear the laws referred to relate to people recorded as male at birth, rather than assigned as male at birth.