

Iran's War on LGBTQ Citizens

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Introduction

Iran's Islamist regime persecutes and discriminates against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) persons. In Tehran, same-sex intercourse is criminalized, and those found engaging in it face severe punishments, including execution. Additionally, the Iranian legal system offers no protections for LGBTQ individuals, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Iran compels LGBTQ children to undergo brutal "conversion therapy" and pressures gay and lesbian Iranians to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. Consequently, gay, lesbian, and bisexual Iranians are forced to hide their sexual orientation and conceal same-sex romantic relationships in order to avoid arrest, imprisonment, flogging, and even execution.

In June 2019, Iran's then-foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, [defended](#) his government's execution of gay people, stating, "Our society has moral principles. And we live according to these principles. These are moral principles concerning the behavior of people in general. And that means that the law is respected and the law is obeyed."

Islamic Revolution and Culture War

The Iranian regime has waged a culture war against Iran's LGBTQ community since the beginning of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his government began systematically oppressing homosexuals upon seizing power in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The new regime quickly and publicly [executed thousands](#), including homosexuals. Khomeini, Iran's first "supreme leader," [justified](#) killing gays as necessary to "eliminate corruption," comparing them to gangrene and claiming the condemned people would otherwise "contaminate others and spread."

The regime weaponizes homophobia to gain popular legitimacy by tapping into the prejudices of more traditional, ultra-conservative Iranians, creating an unsafe environment for LGBTQ persons. In addition to oppressing LGBTQ Iranians through the legal system, the government does not permit the teaching of LGBTQ studies in educational institutions. In 2021, President Ebrahim Raisi also [canceled](#) implementation of the UNESCO 2030 guidelines, which refer to LGBTQ studies. Announcing the cancellation, Saeed-Reza Ameli, the secretary of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, stated that "any international document that would supersede the Islamic Republic's educational policies cannot be accepted."

Senior regime leaders have also expressed virulently homophobic rhetoric. For example, in 2022, Iranian President Raisi [called](#) homosexuality as a "very ugly and despicable practice" that is used by malign forces as a criteria for whether certain countries are "civilized." In a 2023 visit to Uganda, Raisi [said](#), "The West today is trying to promote the idea of homosexuality and by promoting homosexuality they are trying to end the generation of human beings."

This culture war has created a very unsafe family environment for young queer people in Iran. In January 2024 a 17-year-old transgender person was [killed](#) by their father in Tabriz, Iran, after multiple attempts at conversion therapy, simply because of their gender nonconfirming appearance.

"We, the members of queer community in Iran, are not only facing systematic legal oppression and threats from Islamic republic, but also facing all sorts of violence within families and society," said [Omid Iravanipour](#), advisor on Iranian human rights and LGBTQ issues for United Against Nuclear Iran.

Criminalization and Punishment

The Islamic Republic's legal system—including articles 233–241 of its [Islamic penal code](#), which deal with same-sex intercourse—is based on a harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Consensual sexual relations between two men or two women are forbidden. Penetrative intercourse between two men is generally punishable by death for the “passive” party. The “active” party receives capital punishment if he used coercion or is married, and 100 lashes if not. However, if the “active” party is not a Muslim and the “passive” one is, the “active” one receives the death penalty. Non-penetrative intercourse generally is penalized by dozens of lashes. Again, however, if the “active” party is not a Muslim and the “passive” one is, the former is subject to capital punishment. Intercourse between two women incurs a penalty of 100 lashes and is punishable by death upon the fourth offense.

Iranian law [does not distinguish between consensual and non-consensual same-sex intercourse](#), and therefore the authorities can prosecute both perpetrators and victims of sexual assault.

Iranian security forces continue to [harass and arrest](#) individuals suspected of being LGBTQ, in some cases raiding their houses or monitoring their internet activity to gather information. Individuals charged with “sodomy” faced trials where [basic evidentiary standards were not upheld](#). Those persons were also reportedly forced to undergo [anal or “sodomy” examinations while in regime custody](#), which potentially constitutes torture, according to the United Nations and World Health Organization.

In a 2020 [survey](#) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) Iranians conducted by the Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network ([6Rang](#)), almost 20 percent of participants claimed to have been victims of violence by police officers, security forces, prosecutors, and/or judges. According to 6Rang, participants “consistently reported humiliating conduct or physical violence by the ordinary police, security forces, and patrol police (moral police) for reasons such as different gender expression, breaching binary dress-code norms, insufficient hijab (Islamic veil) or participating in house parties.”

LGBTQ activists in Iran have [expressed concern](#) that the regime has used the pretense of other crimes, such as sexual assault, to execute LGBTQ Iranians.

In January 2019, Iranian media [reported](#) that a 31-year-old man was publicly hanged in the southwestern city of Kazeroon based on criminal charges of kidnapping and same-sex rape charges. In 2017, Iran [hanged](#) a man who was 15 years old at the time of his 2012 arrest on charges of murder and same-sex rape. The executed man maintained that his confession was coerced under torture by regime security forces. In 2016, Iran [hanged](#) another man charged with same-sex rape who was 17 years old at the time of his arrest.

In July 2021, the NGO Iran Human Rights [reported](#) that the regime had hanged two men, Farhad Najafi and Ali Ahmadi, for “sodomy by force” (i.e., same-sex rape).

The regime has prosecuted not only those who engage in same-sex relations but persons who publicly support LGBTQ rights, as human rights attorney Shadi Sadr [noted](#). “In a situation where the LGBT+ community is being seen and heard more, the security services are more sensitive and are trying more actively to suppress these movements,” she said.

In December 2019, Rezvaneh Mohammadi, an activist for gender equality, [received a five-year prison](#)

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[sentence](#) for the unprecedented charge of “collusion against national security by seeking to normalize homosexual relations.” The verdict, imposed by then–Tehran Revolutionary Court Judge [Mohammad Moghiseh](#)—known as the “Hanging Judge”—came after the authorities threw Mohammadi into solitary confinement for weeks in the notoriously brutal [Evin Prison](#). Her captors tried to force her—including by [threatening her with sexual assault](#)—to confess to receiving funds to topple the regime. As of 2019, she was [reportedly out on bail](#).

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [arrested](#) a lesbian from Iraqi Kurdistan named Sarah on October 27, 2021, while she was trying to cross into Turkey. Iranian media reported then that the IRGC had arrested several persons for “forming a female trafficking gang and supporting homosexuals.” One of those arrested, was allegedly “the head of a women and girls’ network, trafficking Iranian girls to one of the countries in the region for prostitution and guiding and supporting homosexual groups.” Prior to her arrest, Sarah had been jailed for three weeks after being interviewed by BBC Persian about the challenges facing LGBT persons in Iraq. She had fled to Iran in order to try to enter Turkey and thereby escape further oppression.

In February 2022, the regime [executed](#) Mehrdad Karimpour and Farid Mohammadi for “forced sexual intercourse between two men.” In September 2022, Iranian LGBTQ activists Seddiqi Hamedani and Elham Choubdar were convicted of “corruption on earth” and trafficking and [sentenced to death](#). However, in January 2023, Hammedani and Choubdar [successfully appealed their conviction](#). They were released on bail in March 2023 and Hammedani subsequently fled the country.

Outing by the Regime

Iranian law [classifies gay men and transgender women as mentally ill](#) and therefore excludes them from mandatory military service. Military identification cards identify the legal provisions that justify each card-bearer’s exemption. Therefore, the cards effectively “out” those individuals as gay or transgender and thereby leave them vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

On May 4, 2021, Ali Fazeli Monfared, a young Arab man in the city of Ahvaz, was [kidnapped by his own family members and murdered](#) because he was gay. His half-brother reportedly learned of Ali’s sexual orientation when Ali’s military identification card came in the mail several days prior.

Treatment in Prison

The authorities at Evin Prison [reportedly](#) treat LGBTQ inmates worse than the general population, and as badly as political prisoners. Until 2020, most known LGBTQ prisoners at Evin were segregated in Ward 240, which is run by Iran’s intelligence ministry and is notoriously old and filthy. They were held in eight-square-meter cells. One former inmate, Ahmad, called the ward “Tomb 240” and said that during his incarceration, prison officials and fellow inmates “beat me on any pretext, insulted me, swore at me, and addressed me in terms that I am still ashamed to repeat now.” Multiple former prisoners from that ward have claimed that they were denied daily access to the prison store and the kitchen.

In 2020, according to [IranWire](#), after reports emerged about conditions for LGBT inmates in Ward 240, such inmates were transferred to a basement in Ward 1. The basement, nicknamed by [IranWire](#) “the land of the forgotten,” lacks stores, outdoor spaces, or other amenities. Every prisoner is monitored by no fewer than three cameras, and guards continue to inflict “daily insults and humiliation.”

Iranian prison guards treat LGBTQ people worse than any other inmates, [according](#) to Iranian women's rights activist Mahdieh Golroo, and those prisoners are also often persecuted by their fellow inmates. Golroo, who has repeatedly been arrested and jailed for her activism, says the authorities do not recognize the gender identity of transgender inmates, and thus transgender women are initially housed in men's wards and transgender men in women's wards and "forced to constantly prove their true identities" before they were moved to wards accurately corresponding to their gender. Transgender persons undergoing hormone therapy before their detention are not given access to it in prison.

Violence against LGBTQ Persons

LGBTQ Iranians are often the victims of violence. According to a 2020 6Rang [survey](#), 52 percent of respondents reported "experiencing violence in public spaces," and 62 percent reported being the victim of violence from family members. As 6Rang noted, "This problem is further compounded by the fear of the participants that if they were to file complaints to the police, the law would not only not protect them but also get them arrested and charged with sexual offences."

Conversion Therapy

The United Nations [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#) and [Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran](#) have expressed concern about reports that LGBTQ children in Iran have been forced to undergo purported "therapy"—including administering electric shocks, hormones, and psychiatric medications—to change their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

According to 6Rang, the number of semi-governmental and private clinics using "corrective treatment" for LGBTQ Iranians continues to increase. Such treatment [reportedly](#) includes "electric shock therapy to the hands and genitals... prescription of psychoactive medication, hypnosis, and coercive masturbation to pictures of the opposite sex." A 6Rang [survey](#) reported that "Nearly 90% of the respondents who underwent reparative therapy reported experiencing verbal and psychological abuse during treatment, and more than 60% of them... were subjected to coercion and control. Over a third of participants also experienced violence and physical abuse."

Pressure for Surgery

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first supreme leader, issued a fatwa (legal opinion) 30 years ago [permitting sex-reassignment surgery](#). Consequently, the Iranian regime permits and partially subsidizes such procedures. However, because Tehran criminalizes and harshly punishes same-sex intercourse and treats same-sex attraction as a disease, the regime's transgender policy de facto results in the [authorities](#) and [mental-health professionals and families](#) pressuring gay and lesbian cisgender Iranians to undergo unwanted surgery in order to be able to enter into same-sex relationships without fear of arrest and punishment.

Censorship

The regime [censors](#) sources that deal with LGBTQ matters, including Wikipedia pages and other websites.

Absence of Legal Protections

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Iranian law [does not prohibit discrimination](#) based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The state does not recognize same-sex marriages, civil unions, or domestic partnerships.