Breaking the Silence

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LGBTQ RIGHTS IN IRAN

ABOUT SMALL MEDIA

Small Media is an organisation working to support internet freedom and human rights advocacy in the Middle East and Africa. We do this by providing research, design, training, and technology support to partners, and by working with organisations to develop effective and innovative digital advocacy strategies and campaigns. We also provide digital security support to a range of partners to ensure that they can work safely and securely.

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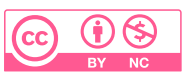

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Executive Summary

In this report, we highlight the incredible resilience, bravery and ingenuity of Iran's LGBTQ citizens in the face of sustained state persecution and continued societal hostility. We map out the urgent media development needs of the LGBTQ community, share examples of existing community initiatives, and signpost areas where local activists and international partners might be able to work together to deliver meaningful benefits to the community.

This Executive Summary provides a brief overview of the key topic areas covered in this report, and summarises our key research findings in brief. A more in-depth exploration of our research findings, along with a comprehensive set of policy recommendations is available in the concluding chapter of this report.

Here are our key findings:

▲ **No progress has been made towards the recognition of LGBTQ people's rights under Iranian law, and there is no evidence that positive legal developments are on the horizon.**

In our analysis we show that the risks facing LGBTQ people span both online and offline worlds. Alongside the Iranian Penal Code, which explicitly criminalises same-sex conduct, the Computer Crimes Law outlaws the sharing of any content deemed by the state to be 'obscene', or that 'disseminates lies'. These laws continue to be deployed against LGBTQ people by the state: for example, a number of LGBTQ Telegram channel administrators have been detained on the basis of these laws.

Given the range of human rights violations endured by the LGBTQ community, we stress the need to support the human rights violation documentation capacities of activists on the ground. Only with comprehensive and high-quality evidence can the institutions and individuals responsible for anti-LGBTQ violence and rhetoric be held to account by defenders in the international community.

We commend the excellent work of international LGBTQ rights organisations on this front, and urge them to continue undertaking documentation work—with a particularly urgent focus on the documentation of online harassment and intimidation—and using it to advocate aggressively for the rights of Iranian LGBTQ people at the international level.

▲ **Although no progress has been made over the past decade with regard to the legal recognition of LGBTQ citizens' rights, our research suggests that social attitudes are slowly shifting in a positive direction, thanks to increased coverage of LGBTQ issues in satellite and online media.**

The high-profile support offered to LGBTQ people by high-profile Iranian superstars such as the pop diva extraordinaire Googoosh and the TV and film actress Behnoush Bakhtiari have gradually helped to push discussions around LGBTQ rights into the mainstream.

At the same time, similar processes have been taking place on social media platforms such as Instagram, where high-profile 'influencers' have sparked lively discussions about LGBTQ rights among their followers. Altogether, the social climate is shifting to the extent that more and more LGBTQ Iranians feel comfortable coming out to their friends and loved ones, and there is a general sense that social progress—while slow—is being made.

▲ **Despite advances in social attitudes, key challenges remain for LGBTQ people seeking to access health services—particularly services relating to sexual health and mental health.**

Besides ongoing questions around broader public acceptance and support, LGBTQ people face a number of very specific challenges around access to core health services; particularly sexual health services and mental health services.

This report shows that a majority of LGBTQ people surveyed did not have access to sexual health resources, and did not know where they could access appropriate services and resources in the event that they needed them. These findings also hold true for mental health support services, with many psychotherapists hostile to notions of minority sexual and gender identities.

We show how the community and its allies in the international community have attempted to step up to meet some of the service delivery needs of LGBTQ people by establishing online support mechanisms. Feedback around these services has been overwhelmingly positive, but these services are starting to show signs of strain and a lack of resources, and will require greater investment in order to scale up their operations.

As well as practical services such as online counselling and sexual health consultations, the community remains active in producing

online resources relating to sexual and mental health. Much of the content we identified was appropriate and well-designed, but some interviewees expressed concern around sub-par translations of foreign-language resources. Access also remains an issue, with a majority of survey respondents remaining unaware of where they could even find such resources.

▲ **Although LGBTQ populations generally demonstrate an awareness of digital security and online safety risks, substantial gaps exist with regard to the implementation of safe online practices. Priority areas for development should include dating apps and social media apps including Instagram and Telegram.**

The community's continued exposure to threats of surveillance, harassment and entrapment online constitutes an urgent threat which should be addressed by digital rights groups and technology companies whose platforms are used by LGBTQ populations.

The rapid uptake of dating apps, and the proliferation of LGBTQ community spaces on social media platforms (primarily Instagram and Telegram) forces users to be mindful of a diverse array of threats that are specific to each platform.

We call upon digital security experts and digital rights organisations to work with the LGBTQ community to develop security resources targeting the full range of community spaces in which LGBTQ people congregate, with a focus on under-examined spaces such as Instagram.

It is also crucial that technology companies take an active role in working with community organisations and digital rights groups to ensure that their platforms are safe environments for the LGBTQ community, and that users can remain informed and aware of the risks they may encounter in these online community spaces.

The issues and challenges outlined here are all explored in far greater depth over the course of this report, in which we make a series of practical, realistic recommendations to international LGBTQ organisations, community activists and advocates, and media development organisations. These recommendations are interspersed throughout the report, and are brought together again in the report's conclusion.

It is our hope that this report provides a useful overview of the situation facing LGBTQ people in Iran today, that it outlines some of the opportunities for digital media development to bring about positive change in relation to public perceptions of, and service

delivery to the LGBTQ community. This report provides a roadmap for LGBTQ organisations in Iran and around the world to support the development of resources and key services to the community, and describes where efforts should be targeted in order to bring about the most meaningful change.

The Small Media team is immensely thankful to our colleagues and friends at 6Rang, Association Spectrum, and Radio Ranginkaman for their support over the course of this research. We are also grateful to Hornet for supporting us in the distribution of our surveys to its users.

We stand ready to work with partners to use this research to help drive positive changes in the lives of Iran's LGBTQ citizens, and to assist in the development of digital resources and online services that support the community's health, security, and freedoms. We hope you find the report interesting and useful.

Introduction

In May 2012, Small Media published 'LGBT Republic of Iran: An Online Reality?'. The culmination of a year and a half of work documenting the online habits of LGBTQ Iranians, this report arrived at a time when Iran's LGBTQ population were under siege by a populist, conservative political establishment, and hemmed in by widespread public hostility.

Despite this, the report offered several stories of hope. It showed how technologies were being leveraged by vulnerable communities to carve out safe spaces, facilitate connections and develop community-specific resources in a society where such activities were otherwise highly dangerous. It showed that LGBTQ Iranians were demonstrating admirable ingenuity, resourcefulness and bravery in assembling new online communities in the face of numerous threats, and argued that technology could prove to be a liberating force for sexual minorities.

But these digital spaces also presented all-new risks; our report offered stark warnings about the Iranian government's increasing capacities for monitoring and cracking down on dissent and perceived 'deviants'. Ahmadinejad's notorious 2007 denial of the existence of gays and lesbians in Iran strikes us now as near-comical, but its ridiculousness should not mask the horrific reality of his administration's record of persecuting, arresting and even executing citizens based on their sexual conduct.

The Ahmadinejad administration's witch hunt made use of all the tools of the digital era. Our 2012 report showed how — at the same time as it pursued sexual minorities offline — it harassed Iranian LGBTQ people in the emerging online spaces that they had carved out on blogging platforms, social media platforms and dating websites.

That was six years ago. Since then, Iran's digital media landscape has transformed beyond all recognition, and President Hassan Rouhani now offers a more conciliatory and socially liberal face to the world. Iran's blogosphere is dead, and both Twitter and Facebook are looking increasingly marginal to Iran's online ecology. Telegram and Instagram are the social media behemoths of the day, while a plethora of dating apps have muscled many old dating websites and chatrooms off the scene. LGBTQ Iranians have more ways of connecting and expressing themselves than ever before

and, among the younger generation, awareness of LGBTQ issues appears to be on the increase.

But with this increased visibility come a number of dangers. Same-sex sexual relations are still outlawed, public sentiment remains largely hostile to LGBTQ people, and community members continue to face risks of forced outing, blackmail, and rejection by their families and friends. Technology offers new opportunities for connection, but it also hands unprecedented power to the state to surveil, censor and intimidate.

Despite these looming threats, this report offers some hope for the future. By working closely with our inspiring Iranian LGBTQ friends and colleagues, we have been able to obtain testimonies from the community inside Iran and from recent émigrés.

This report shows that, despite a complete lack of political will to recognise the rights of LGBTQ citizens, gradual progress is being made in the quest for broader public acceptance. Positive representations of LGBTQ people are being beamed to Iran via satellite, social media 'influencers' are becoming key community allies and LGBTQ spaces continue to develop online to provide safe havens for sexual and gender minorities.

But despite growing community confidence, a number of challenges remain: too many LGBTQ people still struggle to access key services such as sexual and mental health support, and threats to their online security remain dire. This report highlights some of these gaps in service provision and proposes areas for future action and investment by supporters in Iran and the international community.

We've previously shown that technology can provide LGBTQ communities with the space to breathe and to exist in the most difficult environments. Now the challenge is to understand how—against a backdrop of continued state repression—these communities can be further emboldened and empowered to tackle the key challenges they face, whether these take the form of a protracted mental health crisis, the ongoing threat of HIV/AIDS, or the everyday realities of family rejection, harassment, and violence that are endured by LGBTQ people across Iran.

Methodology

This research report is based on a combination of interviews, focus groups, desk research, online surveys and social media monitoring. Between November 2017 and March 2018, we worked with a number of Iranian LGBTQ rights organisations to design and carry out research into the challenges faced by LGBTQ Iranians. Over this period, we carried out four online focus groups and twelve interviews with a total of 26 participants. In addition to a focus group containing participants from all segments of the community, individual focus groups were established for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans participants.

The Iranian government does not permit human rights organisations such as Small Media or our LGBTQ partners to operate inside the country, and so we were only able to engage with Iran-based participants remotely. These focus groups were undertaken using secure, encrypted tools. We opted to include Iran-based participants in online focus groups with Turkey-based participants in order to stimulate a dialogue between recent migrants and community members still resident in Iran.

Focus groups typically lasted between 90 and 120 minutes whereas one-on-one interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Persian by native-speaker interviewers drawn from the LGBTQ community. Three surveys were designed and distributed on an array of community platforms serving LGBTQ Iranians between December 2017 and March 2018. The surveys were also shared on the popular gay dating/hookup app Hornet.

Alongside this, Small Media used the network analysis tool Netlytic to gather data on 121,000 Instagram posts, uploaded between 14 November and 14 December 2017 and featuring at least one of a set of LGBTQ-related hashtags. Further snapshots were taken from 21-28 February and from 17-21 March 2018.

For security reasons, not all of the data gathered on social media engagement patterns collected over the course of this research is included in the report. A thorough content analysis of core LGBTQ community websites has also been undertaken, although again a number of details have been anonymised for security purposes.

1

A Long Shadow

LGBTQ RIGHTS IN IRAN

Despite Rouhani's promises to deliver social and cultural freedoms to Iranian citizens after the long winter of the Ahmadinejad era, his government has offered no substantive concessions to the country's beleagured LGBTQ community.

The story of his administration so far has been one of stasis, deadlock and the continued marginalisation of Iran's LGBTQ community. Although it could be argued that the broadly laissez faire character of Rouhani's social policies create the space for Iranian society to gradually liberalise on social issues, it remains the case that LGBTQ people live under constant threat of harassment, arrest, and even execution.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the legal challenges faced by Iranian LGBTQ people, in violation of the rights and protections afforded to them under international law. It also profiles selected examples of documented violations shared by our partners and interviewees as well as documenting high-profile demonstrations of state-directed anti-LGBTQ rhetoric.

Similar work has also been undertaken by our friends at Outright International and 6Rang, and so our treatment of the legal landscape facing LGBTQ citizens will be brief. If you'd like to see their comprehensive reports on the legal challenges facing sexual and gender minorities, and their documentation of state-directed anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, their reports are available below.[1]

1.1
Domestic Law and LGBTQ Rights

There have been no changes to the status of LGBTQ people within Iranian domestic law under the Rouhani administration. Iran's Penal Code continues to explicitly forbid sexual relations between same-sex partners, whether such relations are consensual or coerced.

In this section we map out the ways that LGBTQ people are explicitly discriminated against within Iranian law and highlight

1 Outright International, (2016), 'Being Lesbian in Iran', available at: http://bit.ly/2w2qBpD Outright International, (2016), 'Being Transgender in Iran', available at: http://bit.ly/2I5R8a9 6Rang, (2017), 'It's an honour to violate homosexuals' rights', available at: http://bit.ly/2HCC4kS

some of the limited options which Iranian citizens can use to protect themselves from prosecution.

1.1.1 ▲ IRANIAN PENAL CODE (2013)

The Iranian Penal Code (IPC), originally adopted in 1991 and amended in 2013, is the primary body of law related to the administration of justice in Iran. Contained within its five books are the collection of articles forbidding same-sex sexual relations and mandating severe punishments for citizens who violate the law.

The IPC distinguishes between a number of different types of sexual acts, which are each prescribed different punishments. Punishments for passive partners are more severe than for active partners, although active partners can also face the death penalty if they are a non-Muslim caught having sex with a Muslim.

The offences and punishments for males engaged in sexual relations (as well as other same-sex conduct such as passionate kissing) are described in detail in Articles 233-237 of the IPC:

Article 233 – *Lavat* is defined as penetration of a man's sex organ (penis), up to the point of circumcision, into another male person's anus.

Article 234 – The *hadd* punishment for *lavat* shall be the death penalty for the insertive/active party if he has committed *lavat* by using force, coercion, or in cases where he meets the conditions for *ihsan*; otherwise, he shall be sentenced to one hundred lashes. The *hadd* punishment for the receptive/passive party, in any case (whether or not he meets the conditions for *ihsan*) shall be the death penalty.

Note 1 – If the insertive/active party is a non-Muslim and the receptive/passive party is a Muslim, the *hadd* punishment for the insertive/active party shall be the death penalty.

Note 2 – *Ihsan* is defined as a status that a man is married to a permanent and pubescent wife and whilst he has been sane and pubescent has had a vaginal intercourse with the same wife while she was pubescent, and he can have an intercourse with her in the same way [vaginal] whenever he so wishes.

Article 235 – *Tafkhiz* is defined as putting a man's sex organ (penis) between the thighs or buttocks of another male person. Note – A penetration [of a penis into another male person's anus]

that does not reach the point of circumcision shall be regarded as *tafkhiz*.

Article 236 – In the case of *tafkhiz*, the *hadd* punishment for the active and passive party shall be one hundred lashes and it shall make no difference whether or not the offender meets the conditions of ihsan [mentioned in Note 2 of Article 234], or whether or not [the offender] has resorted to coercion.

Note – If the active party is a non-Muslim and the passive party is a Muslim, the *hadd* punishment for the active party shall be the death penalty.

Article 237 – Homosexual acts of a male person in cases other than *lavat* and *tafkhiz*, such as kissing or touching as a result of lust, shall be punishable by thirty-one to seventy-four lashes of *ta'zir* punishment of the sixth grade.

Note 1 – This article shall be equally applicable in the case of a female person.

Note 2 – This article shall not be applicable in the cases punishable by a hadd punishment under Shari'a rules.

The IPC also establishes punishments for female same-sex relations (as well as lower-level same-sex conduct, as specified in Note 1 of Article 237):

Article 238 – *Musaheqeh* is defined as where a female person puts her sex organ on the sex organ of another person of the same sex.

Article 239 – The *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh* shall be one hundred lashes.

Article 240 – Regarding the *hadd* punishment for *musaheqeh*, there is no difference between the active or passive parties or between Muslims and non-Muslims, or between a person that meets the conditions for *ihsan* and a person who does not, and also whether or not [the offender] has resorted to coercion.

The articles specified in the IPC clearly violate the rights of Iran's LGBTQ citizens to enjoy liberty, security and privacy. These articles should be repealed from the IPC as a matter of priority in order to bring Iran into line with its international obligations to protect the rights of its LGBTQ citizens.

1.1.2 ▲ COMPUTER CRIMES LAW (2009)

The 2009 Computer Crimes Law (CCL), passed in the middle of the Ahmadinejad era, radically expanded state powers for surveillance and online content censorship and has had a chilling effect upon freedom of expression online.

As digital spaces are central to their experiences, this law poses particular challenges for Iran's LGBTQ community. Three articles of the CCL are particularly problematic for LGBTQ people (although the vague wording of several other articles also pose threats to LGBTQ expression online):

Article 14 criminalises "producing, sending, publishing, distributing, saving or financially engaging in obscene contact by using computer or telecommunication systems, or portable data storage devices."

Article 15 criminalises "the use of computers, telecommunication systems or portable data storage devices for inciting or aiding and abetting in the commission of crimes."

Article 18 criminalises "the use of a computer or telecommunications to disseminate lies with the intention of damaging the public, disturbing the public state of mind or disturbing the official authorities' state of mind."[2]

These ambiguous articles fail to properly define numerous key terminologies. For instance, Note 1 defines 'obscenity' as "materials containing pornographic or immoral scenes or images that are obscene" – defining vague, subjective terminology with yet more vague, subjective terminology.[3] The freedom of expression organisation Article 19 notes in its analysis of the CCL that "Article 14 appears to provide a legal framework for the imposition of a singular concept of morality rather than a mechanism for protecting the public from harm."[4]

As such, Article 14 of the CCL can effectively be used to criminalise the production and distribution of all LGBTQ-related online content, and is far-ranging enough to encompass anything from sexual health resources, to literature, to pornography. Indeed,

2 Article 19, (2009), "Islamic Republic of Iran: Computer Crimes Law." Accessed March 14, 2018. http://bit.ly/2jikYKq

3 *Ibid* pp. 29 – 33.

4 *Ibid*.

Raha Bahreini of Amnesty International reports that LGBTQ online content producers have been arrested on the basis of this law:

"There have been some Telegram groups that have been closed because of the content that they were posting on sexual orientation and gender identity related issues. There is also the wider perception in the community that there is online surveillance of their activities, and if they run Telegram channels or social media pages that raise these issues they could be identified and summoned for interrogation.

And there have been reported cases of individuals that have been summoned for interrogations based on their perceived activities in the area of promoting sexual orientation and gender identity rights issues."

Raha Bahreini, Amnesty International

Subparagraph (b) of Article 15 mandates prison sentences or steep fines for anyone who encourages "the public access to immoral content or facilitates access to this content," or who "provokes or invites the public to participate in crimes against chastity... or acts of sexual perversion."[5]

Although Article 15 never explicitly mentions restrictions on LGBTQ content, the human rights lawyer Mani Mostofi notes in his analysis that the imprecision of language around "immorality and chastity" provides the ambiguity necessary for the laws to be deployed against the LGBTQ community, adding that the Iranian judiciary would certainly use the bill for this purpose.[6]

In a similar vein, Article 18 is so broad in its prohibition of the "dissemination of lies" as to encompass the discussion of all ideas contrary to state ideology — ranging from musings on morality, to political thought, to cultural expression. Such prohibitions could certainly be deployed against individuals who publish material online in support of LGBTQ rights, as well as politically neutral content such as sexual health resources.

There have been numerous reports of arrests of LGBTQ people based on the content they have shared online. The Iranian news agency ISNA reported in 2014 that an individual had been

5 *Ibid.*

6 Mani Mostofi, (2015), 'Iranian's Queer Internet: Human Rights Successes and Setbacks' in Ouright International, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Iran Analysis from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives,* available at: http://bit.ly/2KreaXe p. 104

arrested by the Iranian Cyber Police (FATA) for soliciting for sex on Facebook[7]. This was followed in 2017 with the arrest of six Telegram channel administrators for 'promoting homosexuality'.[8] The CCL is a poorly articulated piece of legislation that poses a variety of threats to the privacy and security of LGBTQ people online, major community content producers and everyday users alike. The law should be immediately repealed to protect LGBTQ people's right to free expression, and replaced with a digital rights bill containing rigorous privacy protections for all citizens.

1.1.3 ▲ VEILING REGULATIONS AND LGBTQ CITIZENS

Besides the criminalisation of same-sex conduct, and the CCL's restriction of LGBTQ expression online, a number of other legal provisions directly impact on the rights of LGBTQ people. Rules and regulations around compulsory veiling are one such example. Article 638 of the IPC requires that women wear the *hijab* in public places, under threat of fines or imprisonment. It also forbids the violation of 'religious taboos':

Article 638 – Anyone who explicitly violates any religious taboo in public beside being punished for the act should also be imprisoned from ten days to two months, or should be flogged (74 lashes).

Note – Women, who appear in public places and roads without wearing an Islamic *hijab* shall be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred Rials.

Lesbian and bisexual women, transgender individuals, and crossdressing males are particularly affected by this article, which makes it incredibly challenging for individuals to fully express their gender identity through their attire. In the event that individuals adopt modes of dress or appearance that challenge stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity, then they place themselves at a grave risk of arbitrary arrest, detention, and ill-treatment. This law contravenes LGBTQ people's rights to free expression, and should be repealed.

7 Iranian Students' News Agency, 04/02/2014, 'Perpetrators of Gay Content on the Internet', available at: http://bit.ly/2Kj3km5

8 Deutsche Welle Persian, 14/09/2017, 'Six Telegram Administrators Charged With 'Promoting Homosexuality'', available at: http://bit.ly/2KicQWJ

1.1.4 ▲ THE NECESSITY OF RADICAL REFORM

Taken together, these laws and regulations are responsible for creating and perpetuating an oppressive atmosphere of fear within Iran's LGBTQ community. Iran's LGBTQ citizens face the threat of harassment, detention, an array of corporal punishments and even capital punishment for expressing their identity and engaging in consensual sexual activities.

If detained and charged under the laws described above, Iranian LGBTQ people do have some recourse, although the situation can be very risky. Despite the enmity of state authorities and vast swathes of the public towards LGBTQ people, there are ways that defendants can minimise the risks of successful prosecutions. For example, Article 19 has produced a useful set of guidelines for LGBTQ Iranians to use if they are detained by the police or other security forces on the basis of anti-LGBTQ regulations.[9] It is crucial that resources like these are distributed widely within the community to protect members from prosecution.

In this vein, it is essential for Iranian LGBTQ people to be made aware of their legal rights when charged with one of these crimes, as protections — albeit limited — do exist. For instance, the Iranian human rights lawyer Hossein Raeesi suggested that 2012/13 reforms to the Iranian Code of Criminal Procedures added protections that could make it easier to defend LGBTQ clients in court, including explicit privacy protections, the right to an attorney in the initial phase of investigations, and the right to remain silent, among others.[10] Indeed, unless LGBTQ defendants confess to the charges levelled against them, capital convictions can be very difficult to secure.

Judicial mechanisms for arbitrary sentencing do, nevertheless, exist. The "knowledge of the judge" provision grants judiciary officials the power to use their own "knowledge" to bridge inconsistencies in law, and to rule on matters of evidence and fact. Article 210 of the IPC states that "knowledge of the judge comprises certainty derived from presentable evidence in connection with an issue before the judge." Human Rights Watch said in its 2012 review of the revised IPC that this provision "also makes it easy for a judge's

9 Article 19, (2018), 'Your Rights And What To Do If You're Arrested', available at: http://bit.ly/2vQcofb

10 Hossein Raeissi, (2015), 'Same-Sex "Crimes" in Revised Iranian Code of Criminal Procedure' in Ouright International, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Iran Analysis from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives*, available at: http://bit.ly/2KreaXe pp. 13-18

individual prejudices toward a defendant's appearance or demeanor to sway his or her rulings, " and that it "in effect makes the judge a key witness against the defendant, but the defendant is not able to examine and test the judge's evidence".[11]

Ultimately, although there are ways that LGBTQ people (and their lawyers) can resist the worst excesses of the Iranian judicial system, the system's significant unpredictability and subjectivity is difficult to mitigate. Until the laws identified in this chapter are repealed or substantially amended, LGBTQ people in Iran will continue to live in fear of harassment, persecution and punishments.

1.2
International Law and LGBTQ Rights

Although no legal protections exist for Iran's LGBTQ citizens at the national level, over the past decade international law has gradually evolved towards increased recognition of the rights of LGBTQ people to live lives free from discrimination, harassment and persecution.

At the simplest level, the rights to equality and non-discrimination are fundamental human rights principles that are clearly enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) , the United Nations Charter, and an array of other human rights treaties. As stated clearly in the opening of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." This statement applies to the world's LGBTQ citizens as much as anyone else, and states such as Iran have a duty to uphold these protections for their own sexual and gender minorities.

The most clear and widely recognised articulation of the implication of international human rights law for LGBTQ people exists in the Yogyakarta Principles +10—a set of guiding principles adopted in 2006 by a group of international human rights experts, and supplemented with ten additional principles in 2017.[12]

The Yogyakarta Principles +10 articulate how existing international human rights law could be applied to preserve the dignity and human rights of LGBTQ people wordwide. Although the Principles

11 Human Rights Watch, (2012), 'Codifying Repression: An Assessment of Iran's New Penal Code', available at: http://bit.ly/2ji517g p. 35

12 The Yogyakarta Principles +10, (2017), available at: http://bit.ly/2I3sBT3

have not been adopted formally by UN institutions, and have been met with hostility by several member states, they nonetheless establish strong international standards by which states' treatment of LGBTQ citizens can be assessed.

We spoke with Raha Bahreini of Amnesty International about the role of international human rights bodies in standing up for Iran's vulnerable LGBTQ community. She noted that global institutions are, for the most part, becoming increasingly sensitive to the need to protect vulnerable members of the global LGBTQ community, and observed that new mechanisms are being introduced to guarantee LGBTQ rights:

"International human rights bodies are way more sensitive to the persecution of LGBT communities compared to a decade ago... There is now a UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of people who face persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity."
Raha Bahreini, Iran Research, Amnesty International

The passing of Resolution 32/2 at the Human Rights Council in 2016 resulted in the creation of an Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This is the first time that a mandate has been created specifically to assess states' implementation of human rights instruments with particular reference to LGBTQ rights. The current mandate holder is Mr. Victor Madrigal-Borloz, who was appointed in December 2017.

Bahreini stressed the need for the conversation about LGBTQ rights in Iran to move beyond just the death penalty, to encompass the daily pressures and routine physical and psychological violence that is inflicted upon the community:

"There is really room for the LGBT community in Iran to receive more attention from these international bodies, and to raise awareness about the gravity of the situation in Iran. Although many people know [about the death penalty], I think the range of violations that members of the community face on a day-to-day basis in the country are not well-known enough internationally."
Raha Bahreini, Iran Research, Amnesty International

International human rights organisations must continue to work with Iranian LGBTQ activists and groups to document human rights violations, and to advocate at the international level for the recognition of LGBTQ rights. In the absence of opportunities for policy advocacy and lobbying at the national level, international

law remains one of the most powerful mechanisms for holding the Iranian government to account for its treatment of sexual and gender minorities.

1.3
Documenting Human Rights Violations

It remains extremely challenging to accurately document the extent to which LGBTQ people are being prosecuted and sentenced on the basis of the laws described in Chapter 1.1. In this section we explain where these challenges arise, and discuss some of the ways that these difficulties might be addressed by the community in Iran and its supporters in the international community.

We first highlight some of the ways that poor documentation and reporting standards have either proven unhelpful or actively counterproductive to defending the rights of Iranian LGBTQ people over the past decade, thereby demonstrating the importance of measured, evidence-based human rights advocacy. We then assess some of the challenges that exist in effectively and comprehensively documenting anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses, and suggest some avenues towards solutions.

1.3.1 ▲ CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND LGBTQ RIGHTS

Over the past decade, international LGBTQ rights activists have excoriated Iran for a number of documented executions of men who were charged with sodomy (*lavat*). Among the most high-profile cases was the 2006 case of Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, a 16- and 18 year-old who were executed for the charge of *lavat be onf* (or forced sodomy) against a 13 year-old boy. The case was taken up by international LGBTQ activists, who claimed that the teenagers' sentence was for an act of consensual sex. But the facts were murky, and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both stressed that insufficient evidence existed to claim that the pair were executed simply for being gay.

Similar challenges arose in the case of Makwan Mouloudzadeh, whose 2007 case also highlighted the sometimes unhelpful nature of the relationship between international LGBTQ advocates and at-risk defendants in Iran. Moloudzadeh was charged with three counts of male rape which were said to have taken place when the defendant was 13 years old.

Figure 1.3.2a

A threatening message to a gay man purporting to be from the 'Notification Office of IRGC Intelligence'

Despite numerous flaws in the case, including the withdrawal of witness statements and the reliance of the prosecution upon Iranian "knowledge of the judge" provisions,[13] Mouloudzadeh was executed in December 2007. Scott Long, the founder of Human Rights Watch's LGBTQ Rights Programme, suggested that the international furore stoked by international LGBTQ organisations 'claiming' Mouloudzadeh as a member of the gay community ultimately politicised and made unwinnable a case that may otherwise have been thrown out of court.[14]

Similarly ambiguous cases have emerged during Rouhani's time in office. In 2016 Hassan Afshar, a 19 year-old from Markazi Province, was executed for the alleged rape of another teenage boy. Again, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch found it difficult to

13 Amnesty International, (2007), 'Iran: Execution Of Child Offender Makwan Moloudazdeh Is A Mockery Of Justice', available at: http://bit.ly/2HHy1Q9

14 Human Rights Watch's Scott Long noted that international attention brought to the case of Makwan Mouloudzadeh may have prolonged the case, and even prevented it from being dropped by the Iranian judiciary.
Scott Long, *The Guardian 31/03/2008*, 'The Issue is torture', available at: http://bit.ly/2rcRWQ2

establish the facts of the case, and argued Afshar's defence on the basis of broader objections to juvenile executions.

Ambiguities arise from the fact that in cases of consensual sex, it is the 'passive' partner who faces the death penalty, whereas in rape cases it is the 'active' partner who is at risk of execution. This creates a strong incentive for passive partners to press rape charges against their partners if there is a risk of them facing *lavat* charges, as in this way they are likely to escape the death penalty in the event that their case is successful.

It therefore remains challenging to verify the facts around high-profile 'gay execution' cases, and it is almost always impossible for international observers to distinguish genuine rape cases from those that have been lodged in an act of self-preservation by the passive partner. Although we would stress the need for Iran to prohibit capital punishment in all cases, the current state of the IPC clearly creates perverse incentives for consensual sexual partners to testify against one another, and is in no way conducive to justice.

1.3.2 ▲ VERIFICATION CHALLENGES

As noted, verifying human rights reports remains an enormous challenge for international human rights monitoring organisations. This does not only extend to executions; the state's harassment of LGBTQ citizens through lower level 'public decency' laws is also difficult to catalogue and advocate for at the international level, in large part owing to LGBTQ community members' fears of drawing unnecessary attention to themselves and their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Community members' understandable fear about the prospect of coming forward and speaking out about anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses poses a challenge for international organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, who rely on such testimonies for their documentation work. Raha Bahreini, Amnesty International's Iran Researcher, spoke about these challenges:

"One major challenge is that there is so much fear on the part of individuals who are targeted—especially when they are arrested in the context of parties, or if they are reported to the authorities—that they do not contact human rights groups outside the country. It's therefore really hard for us to know to what extent members of this community are actually being prosecuted, and for what kinds of activities and behaviours they are being targeted."

"We have come across cases where... individuals are arrested [at] a party that the authorities saw as a gay party. And then they're sentenced to flogging for indecent behaviour alongside the consumption of alcohol, and other activities. But they are so afraid that they do not want their cases to be published at all – even though there's a great chance of success in terms of raising international awareness, and maybe even compelling the authorities not to carry out the flogging sentence."

Raha Bahreini, Iran Researcher, Amnesty International

The need for more comprehensive primary documentation of Iran's persecution of LGBTQ citizens is clear, and international organisations working in this space should therefore redouble efforts to develop secure channels and mechanisms through which such reports can be submitted.

Another challenge in documentation relates to accurately identifying the parties responsible for violating LGBTQ people's rights. A number of individuals have produced evidence of harassment and persecution by individuals whose relationship with the state remains ambiguous. For example, on focus group participant living in Turkey reported that he had been forced to leave Iran in 2016 after receiving a threatening SMS message ordering him not to leave his home province, as he was under investigation on sodomy charges. The SMS purported to be from the 'Notification Office of IRGC Intelligence'. Although no organisation with this precise name appears to exist (at least publicly), it would not be out of the realm of possibility that the message originated from a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s shadowy parallel intelligence services. Yet equally it could have been an act of harassment by a malicious individual unaffiliated with state actors:

"I received a text message on my mobile phone from the Revolutionary Guard intelligence protection office which asked me not to leave my city, as there was a court case being lodged against me for the act of sodomy. It was so scary, and that's why I fled from Iran.

Then when I left the country, my father received another message on his phone regarding my sexual orientation."

"Hossein", gay man, Turkey

The SMS in full read:

Greetings. Be aware that you are forbidden by law from leaving the province of [redacted] *until such a time as a verdict has been reached on your charge of sodomy. Notification Office of IRGC Intelligence.*

Although the enormously damaging impact of such threats is plain to see, it is harder to conclusively attribute responsibility for threats such as this (and similar documented cases) to the state, or any specific state-aligned organisation. The lack of clarity and consistency about the organisations claiming responsibility for such acts of harassment is problematic for rights advocates. A lack of consistency across documented cases suggests that harassment of LGBTQ people is either being undertaken by a disunited array of state-aligned institutions, or else by anti-LGBTQ vigilantes with ambiguous levels of institutional backing.

For these reasons, further research to comprehensively investigate and document the origins of digital attacks against LGBTQ people would be highly valuable both to inform digital security strategies and to hold state and state-aligned institutions to account.

1.4
LGBTQphobia in Public Discourse

The Iranian state's hostility to LGBTQ people is not only enshrined in law, but also permeates the length and breadth of the country's politics in the form of anti-LGBTQ fearmongering and widespread demonisation of the country's LGBTQ community.

The transformation of LGBTQphobia into state orthodoxy is part of a drive to expel so-called 'Western' influences from Iranian society. In casting LGBTQ Iranians as the 'other', and Western states as the community's champions, the state is attempting to cast emerging LGBTQ identities as the result of an insidious foreign invasion, and roll back the trend of social liberalisation that has been ongoing since the presidency of Mohammad Khatami.[15]

State homophobia in Iran has been documented comprehensively by the lesbian and trans rights organisation 6Rang in their

15 For more on this phenomenon, see Katarzyna Korycki and Abouzar Nasirzadeh, (2013), 'Homophobia as a Tool of Statecraft: Iran and Its Queers', in Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (eds.) *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, (pp. 174-195), University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL.

December 2017 report *It's a great honour to violate homosexuals' rights: Official hate speech against LGBT people in Iran*. The report notes that:

"Homosexual persons are regularly depicted in official statements and state media outlets as "unnatural", "deviant", "immoral", or "diseased". They are also accused of collusion in Western-orchestrated conspiracies aimed at undermining the Islamic Revolution or corrupting the Muslim population."[16]

Although the report tracks state homophobia back to 2011, there are a number of notable events documented in the report that took place during the Rouhani period. The first describes an incident from the 2017 presidential elections, in which a row emerged over the implementation of the UN's 'Education 2030' initiative into the government's education agenda. Adopted by UNESCO in 2015, the Education 2030 agenda sets out a number of key targets relating to gender, human rights and the recognition of diversity.

The plan was blasted by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as a vehicle of Western influence in Iran, and the conservative establishment quickly rallied to decry its commitment to "recognition of diversity" as a trojan horse for the introduction of LGBTQ rights. The Guardian Council member Mohsen Heidari stated:

"This document [Education 2030] provides that those from vulnerable groups shall be protected but ... by vulnerable groups it actually means homosexuals. [...] This document will ensure that... 13 years from now, the children of Iran and other Muslim countries will be driven away from [the] Quran and spirituality, and [will] become wholly occupied with perversion and sexual teachings."[17]

Similarly, Assembly of Experts member Ahmad Alamolhoda insisted that the Education 2030 agenda would result in the 'promotion' of homosexuality:

"By forbidding [the authorities] from using violence to confront students [who engage] in perversion ... and masturbation, Education 2030 facilitates the promotion of perversion."[18]

16 6Rang, (2017), 'It's a great honour to violate homosexuals' rights', available at: http://bit.ly/2HCC4kS p. 7

17 Pol-e Sefid, 02/06/2017, 'Ayatollah Heidari: In the Ahwazi elections, the law is the law', available at: http://bit.ly/2HGF4gf

18 Fars News Agency, 02/06/2017, 'Ayatollah Alamolhoda: 2030 Document will return the country to the era before Islamic Revolution', http://bit.ly/2vZuiw9

Regrettably, Rouhani administration officials did little to deescalate the homophobic language of the row, with Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh declaring at a campaign event in Kashan that:

"Associating [the government] with the teaching of perversion in schools is a great lie and no teacher would ever agree to this."[19] Eventually, Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi announced that Iran had notified UNESCO that any part of Education 2030 that goes against the country's cultural, religious, social and moral beliefs would be unenforceable.

But this has not been the only incidence of homophobic rhetoric during the Rouhani period. Elsewhere, Kazem Gharib Abadi, the Deputy Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights and International Affairs, said in a media interview in December 2016:

"The rights of perverts and the Western lifestyle are among those practices that Westerners try to impose on the world in the name of universality."

The failure of the Iranian political class to address the question of LGBTQ rights in a measured manner, and its insistence upon stoking fears of LGBTQ people as both agents and victims of Western cultural imperialism, are demonstrative of the limited opportunities that exist for advancing LGBTQ political rights at this juncture.

1.5
Recommendations: Supporting LGBTQ Rights in Iran

As this chapter has demonstrated, Iran's LGBTQ citizens are subject to innumerable violations of the rights guaranteed to them under international law. The Iranian state is responsible for creating a hostile environment for the community, with national law continuing to offer no space for citizens to express themselves, to organise, or even to exist publicly—whether on- or offline.

At the same time as legislation like the IPC and CCL enable state-directed persecution, a host of state-affiliated institutions and malign individuals continue to pursue LGBTQ people on apps and

19 Freegate News, 18/05/2017,'Oil Minister: Didn't Raeisi get tired of campaigning with Tataloo?', RuClip, available at: http://bit.ly/2HBYvTu

social media platforms, emboldened by the incessant stream of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric being propagated by officials and public figures in the national media.

It is our view that a series of radical reforms of existing legislation are required in order to guarantee the human rights of LGBTQ citizens. To the Rouhani government, state-affiliated organisations, and members of parliament we suggest the following measures:

▲ **The *hadd* punishments prescribing punishments for same-sex sexual conduct violate LGBTQ people's rights, as guaranteed in international law. Articles 233-40 should be struck from the IPC, and the IPC reformed.**

▲ **Articles 14, 15 and 18 of the CCL constitute a violation of the LGBTQ community's rights to free expression online, and to citizens' privacy. The CCL should be repealed and replaced with a new digital rights bill guaranteeing citizens' online freedoms.**

▲ **Iranian state officials and public figures must cease using language that demonises the LGBTQ community, and that incites hatred and violence.**

We realise that the potential for policy change at the national level is limited. Although we recognise that these reforms are largely unattainable at this moment in time, we would stress the importance of maintaining these ambitious aspirations for the long haul, as public opinion slowly shifts in the direction of recognising LGBTQ people's human rights.

International organisations and LGBTQ rights advocacy groups are already actively engaged in work to document human rights violations against Iran's LGBTQ community, and to advocate for their rights at the international level. We recognise and commend their efforts, and suggest some potentially fruitful avenues for further work specifically relating to rights documentation and advocacy:

▲ **Human rights documentation organisations should continue to develop and support tools and mechanisms that allow LGBTQ Iranians to securely report and document homophobic threats, violence, harassment and persecution—whether at the hands of the state, or individuals.**

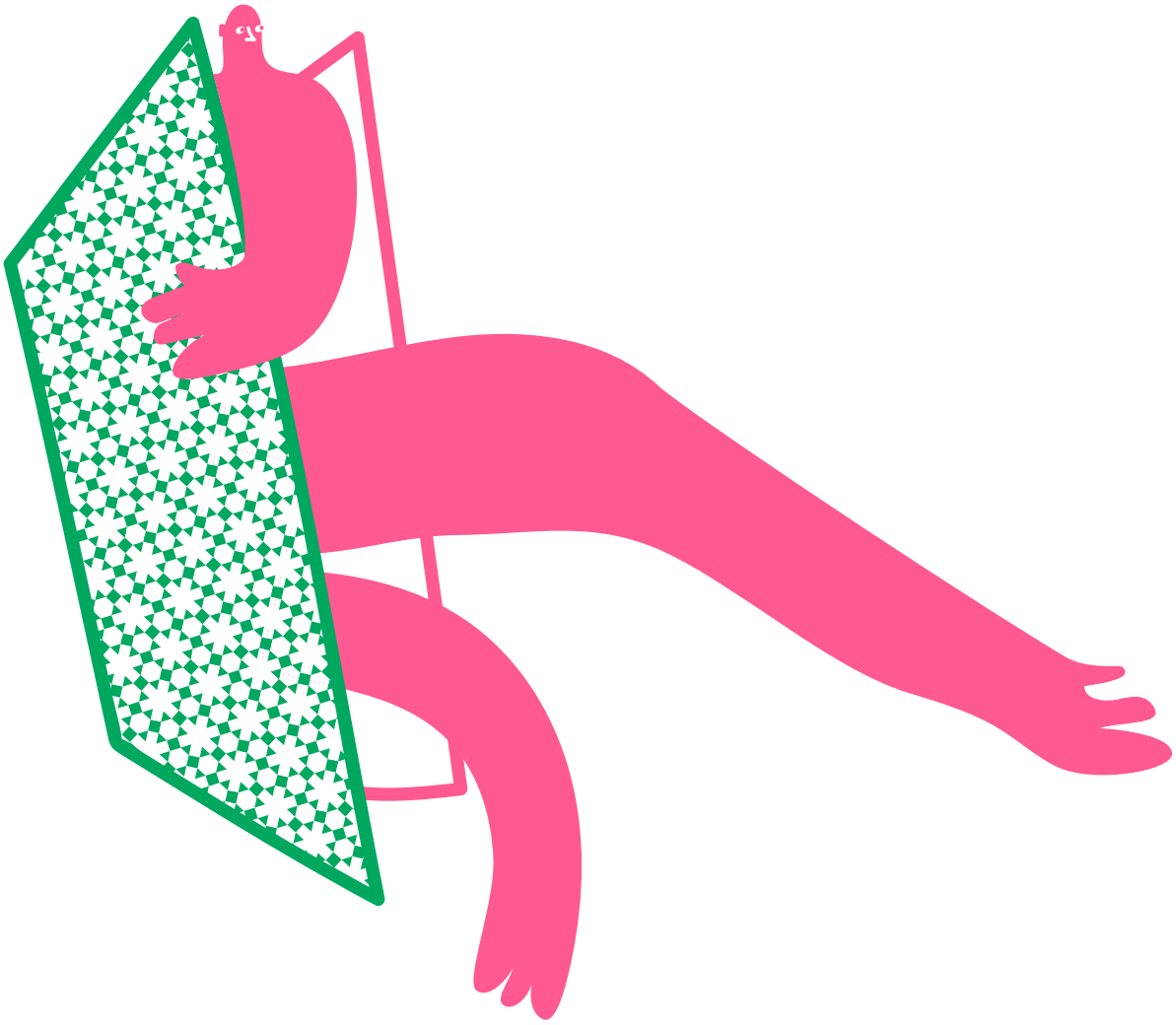
▲ Anti-LGBTQ rhetoric from state officials should be actively challenged through the development of visible online campaigns and online resources debunking their claims.

▲ Further research should be supported to comprehensively document the origins of threats and harassment waged against LGBTQ people online, in order to provide rigorous resources to international human rights advocates.

2

Growing Pains

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY



The previous chapter highlighted the myriad ways that Iranian LGBTQ people continue to be subjected to intense pressure from the state, in the form of harsh legal restrictions and protracted campaigns of anti-LGBTQ hate speech.

Nevertheless, there are signs that the Iranian LGBTQ community is growing more confident and assertive than at any point since the Revolution, buoyed by a constant stream of LGBTQ-friendly international media and the gradual evolution of social attitudes about sexual and gender minorities.

In this chapter, we trace some of the ways in which Iranian LGBTQ people are handling questions of identity and community at a time when more and more LGBTQ-friendly resources are being made available to young Iranians, and when public opinion is starting to shift.

To begin, we draw upon our survey of 806 LGBTQ respondents who answered questions about their process of self-identification, their 'outness', and their relationship with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. We explore who they've identified as community champions, and also who they believe has caused the most harm to LGBTQ people in Iran in the last decade.

We then look at how digital media is reshaping public discourse around issues of sexuality and gender, by examining the influence not only of pro-LGBTQ celebrities and public advocates in Iran and the diaspora, but also of the new social media 'influencers' who are harnessing the power of Instagram and Telegram to put LGBTQ equality on the map.

Finally, we profile some of the online spaces that have emerged to provide support and information to the LGBTQ community, and identify gaps in content and service provision that still need to be filled.

2.1
I Am What I Am: Asserting LGBTQ Identity in Iran

Given the existence of such stringent and unforgiving anti-LGB laws in Iran, and the widespread entrenchment of intolerance against all members of the LGBTQ community, the pressure on people to suppress their desires and conceal their identities is immense. And yet, based on our survey of 806 LGBTQ Iranians, carried out between 14 March and 8 April 2018[20], it seems as though increasingly the community is feeling comfortable enough to start edging out of the closet, and to act more assertively in proclaiming its identity.

In this section we dig into some of our survey results to explore the process of coming out in contemporary Iran, and to understand how LGBTQ Iranians feel about the social and political changes that are slowly reshaping the country's cultural landscape.

2.1.1 ▲ CREAKING OPEN THE CLOSET DOOR: LGBTQ 'OUTNESS' AND GROWING CONFIDENCE

Out of our full survey sample, 60% of respondents are 'out' to at least one person. This is interesting enough, given the risks that exist around publicly claiming LGBTQ identities, whether they be risks of state violence, family rejection, or ongoing harassment.

But things start getting really interesting when we dig into the demographic breakdowns of our sample[21].

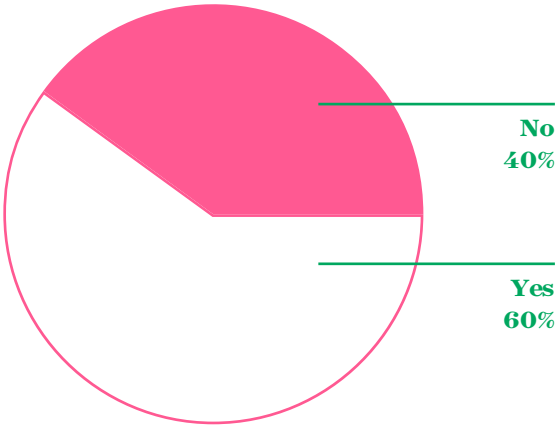
First, examining the age demographics, we can see that at ever-increasing frequency, younger LGBTQ people are coming out and discussing their sexual orientation and gender identity with their peers. Out of all the age cohorts under 30, more than 60% of respondents were out to at least one person, rising to 68.6% of under-18s.

Looking at 'outness' through the lens of sexual orientation reveals interesting stories about various communities' visibility and

20 Survey participants were obtained by advertising our surveys on two community platforms (one for the wider LGBTQ community, and the other primarily for bisexual and queer people) and the gay dating app Hornet. As a consequence of the extensive reach of Hornet, the majority of the participants in this survey are gay men. For a full demographic breakdown of our sample, see Annex 1.

21 For details about the demographic composition of our surveys, see Annex 1.

Have you revealed your sexuality or gender identity to anyone?



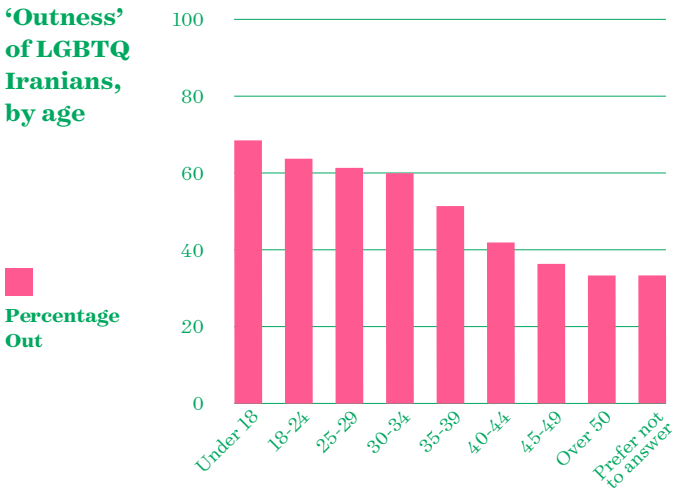


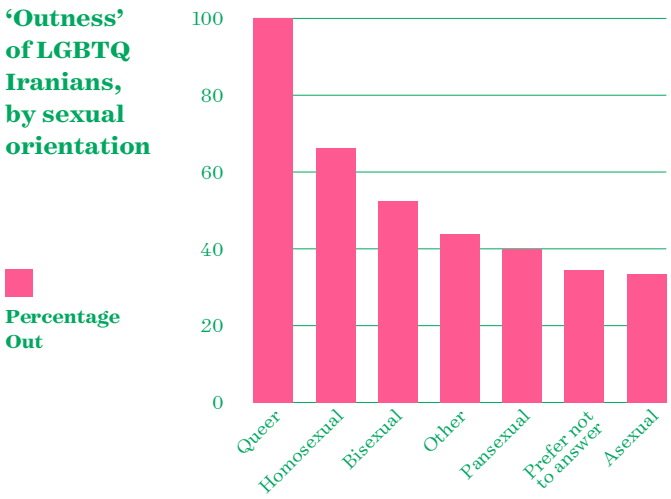
Figure 2.1.1a

Figure 2.1.1b

confidence.[22] At the high end are those who identify as 'queer' (though it should be noted that these respondents constituted only a small segment of our sample).

Following the queer respondents are homosexuals and bisexuals. The lower incidence of 'outness' among bisexuals is somewhat illustrative of the phenomenon of bisexual erasure and marginalisation in society and the LGBTQ community itself. The comparative invisibility of pansexual and asexual people in society and the community is also very notable here (though again, we note the caveat of these respondents constituting a tiny proportion of our sample).

22 We note that the small number of queer, pansexual and asexual respondents should preclude us from making cast-iron assumptions about the dynamics of these populations.



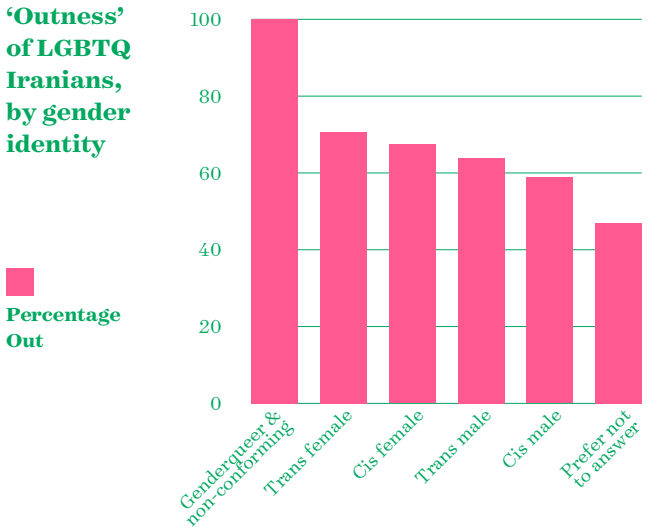


Figure 2.1.1c

Figure 2.1.1d

The breakdown by gender identity also offers some interesting insights. Firstly, it should be noted that the small sample size of trans women and gender non-conforming respondents prevents us from making broad assumptions about their community dynamics. Yet the higher rates of 'outness' amongst trans women and men than cisgender LGBQ people does suggest that the state's acknowledgement and recognition of transgender citizens, and the resultant existence and activity of trans-focused NGOs has resulted in higher levels of confidence among these groups in comparison to LGBQ sexual minorities.

2.1.2 ▲ FINDING SPACE TO BREATHE: PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

The increasing tendency for young LGBTQ people to come out has not taken place in a vacuum. We were interested to understand whether the growing confidence of certain segments of the LGBTQ

"Public opinion is more accepting of LGBTQ people now than it was in 1391." How do you feel about this statement?

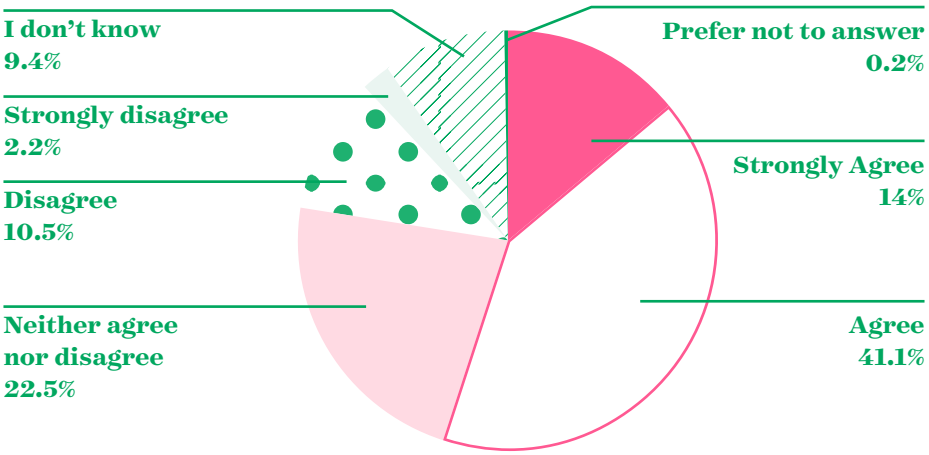


Figure 2.1.2a

community could be linked to a general sense of liberalisation in public opinion around LGBTQ issues, and in the state's policies toward the community.

Indeed, a majority of our survey respondents (55%) agreed that public opinion has become more accepting of LGBTQ people since the end of the Ahmadinejad presidency in 2013. Only a small minority (12.7%) disagree with this statement, with just under a quarter of respondents (22.5%) perceiving little change.
In light of this general sense of optimism about the gradual evolution of public opinion, it's striking how poorly the LGBTQ community perceives the Rouhani administration. Only 12% of survey respondents agree that his government has brought about

"Rouhani's government has brought about positive changes for LGBTQ people." How do you feel about this statement?

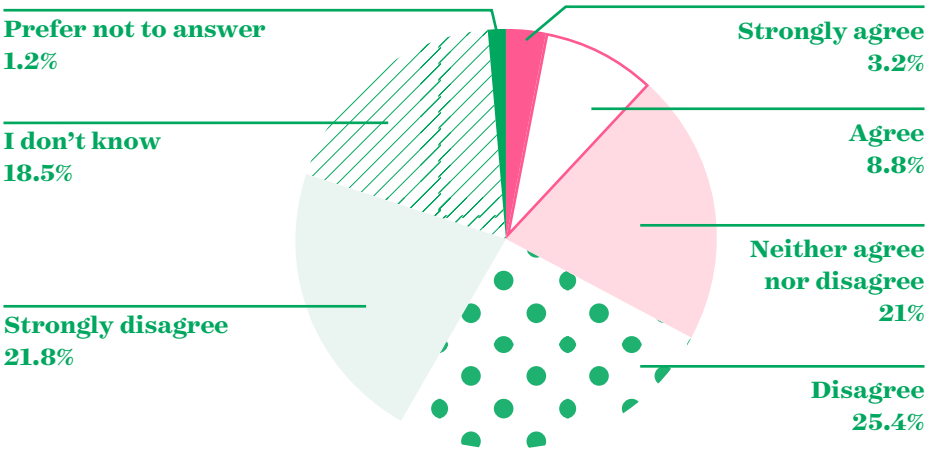


Figure 2.1.2b

"I am optimistic that LGBTQ people could advance their legal rights under the Rouhani administration." How do you feel about this statement?

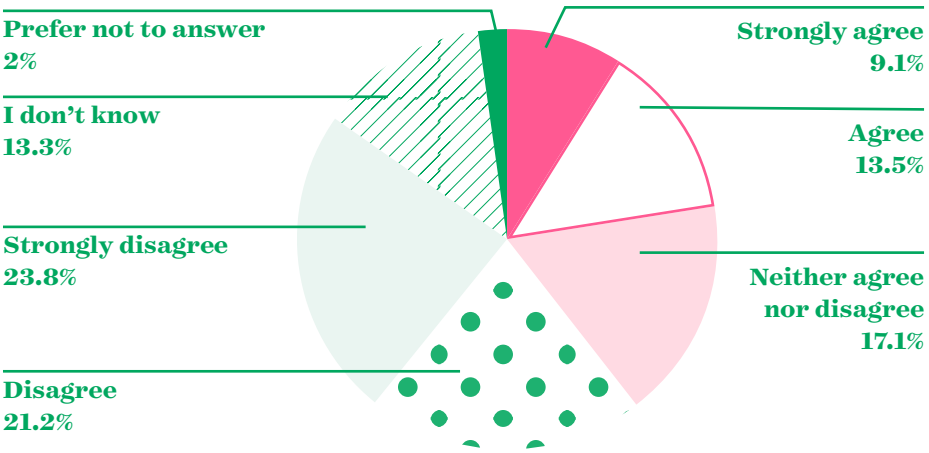


Figure 2.1.2c

positive changes for LGBTQ people. We can infer that governmental policies have not been perceived as a driver of changes in social attitudes towards LGBTQ people.

Similarly, less than a quarter of respondents (22.6%) expected Rouhani's government to institute reforms that would advance the legal rights of LGBTQ people in the coming years.

It appears that the community anticipates that stringent anti-LGBTQ laws are here to stay, but that nonetheless the gradual evolution of public opinion on LGBTQ rights issues may allow the community some additional breathing space to exist, and to develop.

Taking our survey results in full, it appears that the community has little faith in the Rouhani administration to champion the rights of Iran's sexual and gender minorities, or to expend political capital on shifting public opinion on LGBTQ issues. As a consequence, it falls to the community and its supporters in the international community to drive social change. But how realistic a prospect is this?

2.1.3 ▲ UNITED, WE STAND: THE EMERGENCE OF CROSS-COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

One challenge that we identified in our 2013 report was the relative fragmentation of the LGBTQ community in Iran. The lack of public community spaces in Iran, the ongoing suppression of LGBTQ identities, and the restriction of individuals to sub-community-specific online spaces (such as gay male dating apps, transgender

forums, etc.) has made it difficult for the community to come together around shared goals.

Some of these challenges emerged during our interviews and focus groups. For instance, in one focus group containing gay men, lesbians and trans participants, a gay man named "Amir" expressed his perception that lesbian women viewed gay men negatively, despite what he viewed as actions of solidarity and support from the gay community:

"In our community gay men usually don't hold anything against lesbian women, but lesbians do not like gay men. I usually hold regular weekly sessions for lesbians, and once one of them asked me to leave! Even though I am the organiser!"
"Amir", gay man, Turkey

Despite his frustrations at perceived rejection from Iranian lesbians, "Amir" also expressed concern about being visibly associated with transgender people, expressing fears about their visibility leading him to experience harassment and discrimination:

"I didn't hang out with trans people, because it's very easy to spot them... If they came to my flat, my landlord would understand that they were trans."
"Amir", gay man, Turkey

This example speaks to the fears of retribution of some community members if they are seen with others who publicly present as LGBTQ, and reflects some of the difficulties that exist in mobilising action across the spectrum of the LGBTQ community, especially in offline spaces.

Challenges do not just arise in offline contexts. Even in online spaces, internal community divisions can be discerned. "Zeynab", an Iranian lesbian based in Turkey, spoke of how a bisexual woman was forced out of a Telegram group for lesbians:

"In our Telegram group there was one bisexual woman. One of the lesbian members send her a message and asked her to leave. She told her 'This place is only for lesbians. You are not a lesbian!'"
"Zeynab", lesbian, Turkey

Bisexual erasure and biphobia are not unique to the Iranian context; worldwide, bi people are subject to scorn from both straight and LGTQ people for being 'unsure', or for being 'too afraid' to commit to their perceived homosexuality. The exclusion of bisexual

people from LGTQ spaces heightens their sense of isolation and undermines community solidarity, and should be challenged everywhere it is found.

Although evidently challenges exist in bringing sub-communities together, participants generally expressed the view that LGBTQ solidarity remained an important value to uphold, and that further work should be undertaken to unite the community around shared goals. "Azar", an Iran-based trans woman, articulated the importance of cross-community unity:

"All [LGBTQ people] should be under one flag, since they're all being hurt in the same way, and are under pressure from the same source.

"There's that proverb 'divide and conquer'; they're trying to create distance between people by saying "You're trans, you're different from those gays and lesbians', and when they've divided the community and smashed its unity, then they will come to the trans community and again they will say that there are 'real' trans people and 'fake' trans people. And again, among the 'real' trans people they mean only transsexuals, and will not accept others as trans.

And even those transsexuals who are recognised in bureaucracy and by the administration—they will give them a hard time until they break. It's as if they want to break down a boulder—they'll break it down piece by piece, so that it gets smaller and smaller. The regime in fact wants to create these divisions amongst this minority."

"Azar", transgender woman, Iran

Similar sentiments were expressed by four transgender participants, who expressed the need for unity in purpose and action to advance the cause of LGBTQ rights:

"I believe all LGBTQ people are one family, and their concerns should be progressed together, one hundred percent. This community has common social problems, despite [our] differences."

"Roya", transgender woman, Iran

"[The LGBTQ community's] problems and issues may be different, but in general society looks at them all the same way, and if one of these communities grows, then the whole community grows. It's not something where we can say that lesbians have progressed, or trans people have progressed."

"Sepideh", transgender woman, Iran

"I believe all LGBTQ people are one family, and our feelings and our same-sex love [are the basis of] our shared feelings, though we have differences in many areas."

"Bijan", transgender man, Iran

"I think this community is real and exists. [Otherwise] where should we put trans homosexuals? Our issues are all connected, and we can't separate them. [But] this doesn't mean we shouldn't have our own spaces [as well]."

"Shokoufeh", lesbian transgender woman, Iran

There is an opportunity for initiatives to rally the LGBTQ community around shared objectives, and to start pushing questions around sexual and gender minority rights into mainstream public discourse. Indeed, this is already happening to an extent, with Instagram 'influencers', celebrities, and diaspora-based media outlets increasingly discussing LGBTQ themes. Let's now turn to see how an increasingly assertive LGBTQ community and its allies are using digital media to start shaping society's understanding of these issues.

2.2
Speaking Out: Digital Media and the Mainstreaming of LGBTQ Issues

It is notable that more than half of LGBTQ people surveyed perceived an overall improvement in public perceptions of the community over the past decade, at the same time as a mere 12% attributed positive changes to the Rouhani government. Such results suggest that public perceptions have been transformed by sociocultural forces, rather than any progressive action on the part of the state.

In this section we listen to some of the community's perceptions of how digital media has transformed life for LGBTQ people in the last decade, and delve a little deeper into how specific social media platforms, dating apps and messaging services have facilitated new forms of connection and community-building.

2.2.1 ▲ OPINION SHAPERS: THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS AND ONLINE ALLIES

A number of our interviewees and focus group participants spoke to us about the origins of the perceptible shifts in public opinion we've just discussed. "Keyvan", an Iranian bisexual based in Canada,

spoke about what he perceived to be the gradual normalisation of LGBTQ topics among certain segments of society, and especially online:

"I see more people are familiar with LGBTQ issues – for instance on Twitter I see people are talking more openly, and using terms easily. I think there's a higher level of awareness at least among a specific social group. They know and accept the existence of LGBTQ [people] but at the same time we need to connect more people to the Internet, or I do not know, maybe we should find ways to change the culture in society itself [offline]."

"Keyvan", bisexual man, Canada

In a similar vein, "Jaleh", a lesbian based in Iran, spoke about the cultural impact of discussions about LGBTQ issues in the media, whether from imported international films or diaspora-produced TV shows:

"[The situation] has improved. You can hear the discussions [about LGBTQ issues] everywhere, and in my family too. These days in art and movies one sees homosexuals often, and this is very effective at making them visible. All of the media—including the BBC and others—have played a role. It seems like the taboo [and stigma] around the issue is broken, and has now been trivialised to a large extent."

"Jaleh", lesbian, Iran

"Farhad", a transgender man living in Iran, also spoke about the power of the media to reshape public opinion of LGBTQ people, adding that even in the Iranian national media, progressive discussions around transgender rights were starting to break into the mainstream thanks in large part to public advocacy efforts by high-profile celebrities such as the actress Behnoush Bakhtiari:

"These days, 14 year-old teenagers come out and say they are homosexual... in general, debates on the topic of [sexual orientation and gender identity] have become more frequent. Trans issues are also discussed in the official [Iranian] media. For instance, [the actress] Behnoush Bakhtiari talked about trans people, which was very effective at raising awareness."

"Farhad", transgender man, Iran

"Elina", another lesbian interviewee living in Iran, emphasised that it is not just the traditional media that's responsible for changing public perceptions, but that social media platforms and key 'influencers' are proving influential in bringing LGBTQ rights into public discourse:

"[A couple of Instagram celebrities] are famous for travelling around Iran and solving people's problems, and they've even received some prizes... some nights ago, during the Grammy awards ceremony, [one of them] posted a comment about Elton John being gay, praising him. Then she used the hashtag #HeIsGay and I think this did a lot of good. This was a first."

"Elina", lesbian, Iran

Indeed, in our analysis of online LGBTQ content we also observed several examples of different high-influence social media accounts, or 'influencers', addressing LGBTQ-related content and bringing issues to the attention of their largely heterosexual, cisgender audiences. Let's now turn to examine the significance of social media for LGBTQ Iranians a little more thoroughly, by delving into some of the discussions that are taking place on one of the largest digital media behemoths operating in Iran: Instagram.

SNAPSHOT
COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS AND ANTI-LGBTQ VILLAINS

We asked our sample of 806 LGBTQ survey respondents who they saw as having done the most to advance LGBTQ equality in Iran, and who they viewed as having caused the most damage to the community.

The results support our assertion that apolitical public figures and celebrities are acting as some of the most powerful allies and advocates for sexual and gender minorities, while the political world remains staunchly opposed to LGBTQ rights.

Here are the **COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS** named by our survey respondents:

BEHNOUSH BAKHTIARI – 33 nominations – An Iranian film and TV actress who has been a vocal public advocate for the transgender community in Iran. She has used a number of interviews to educate the public about gender identity, and to advocate for transgender people to be treated with dignity.

GOOGOOSH – 28 nominations – An unparalleled megastar of Iranian pop music, Googoosh was the most influential artist of the 1970s. Although inactive from 1979-2000, Googoosh's career has seen a full resurgence in the past two decades. In 2014 she released the music video for her song "Behesht", which represented a lesbian love story, and was dedicated to the LGBTQ community.

ARSHAM PARSI – 22 nominations – A Canada-based LGBTQ activist and human rights advocate. Parsi is the founder and Executive Director of the Iranian Queer Railroad Organisation, which provides support to Iranian LGBTQ refugees globally.

Other community champions named by respondents included the LGBTQ rights activist Shadi Amin, the bisexual poet and writer Fereydoun Farrokhzad, and the gay choreographer and dancer Mohammad Khordadian.

The **COMMUNITY VILLAINS** named by our survey respondents included:

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD – 72 nominations – The former President of Iran ignited global outrage and ridicule when in 2007 he denied the existence of homosexuals in Iran. His government oversaw a sustained campaign of hate speech and persecution of the LGBTQ community.

ALI KHAMENEI – 37 nominations – Iran's Supreme Leader has maintained a hard line against the recognition of LGBTQ rights. He has maintained that homosexuality is a Western import, and stated at a meeting of government and state officials in 2016 that "there is no worse form of moral degeneracy than homosexuality'.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC – 8 nominations – After Ahmadinejad and Khamenei, the most frequently cited obstacle to LGBTQ rights was named as the Islamic Republic itself, owing to the inherent challenges in advocating for LGBTQ rights given the state's theological underpinnings.

Other politicians also bore the brunt of respondents' criticisms, including reformists and moderates such as Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami.

2.2.2 ▲ THE BIG PICTURE: LGBTQ CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM

Instagram is the most widely-used social media platform used in Iran today, dominating the online media landscape in the absence of Facebook (which is filtered universally) and Twitter (which is filtered by a number of ISPs[23]). The social network is estimated to have an Iranian user base in excess of 24 million people.[24] As such, the platform offers immense opportunities for the community to carve out safe spaces, and for allies and advocates to share messages in support of LGBTQ equality.

Using the social media analysis tool Netlytic, we collected 736 posts containing the hashtag '#همجنسگرا' (#homosexual), along with 7498 user comments on these posts, between 21 and 28 February 2018. This offers us a useful snapshot of how the issue of homosexuality is discussed online, the types of users who engage with it, and the types of reactions that these posts get from Instagram users.

23 Iran Human Rights, 21/02/2017, 'Briefing: Tracking Twitter's Growing Popularity in Iran', available at: https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/02/briefing-twitter-third-wave-in-iran/

24 *Financial Tribune, 05/02/2018*, 'Iran ranked world's 7th Instagram User', available at: financialtribune.com/articles/economy-sci-tech/81384/iran-ranked-world-s-7th-instagram-user

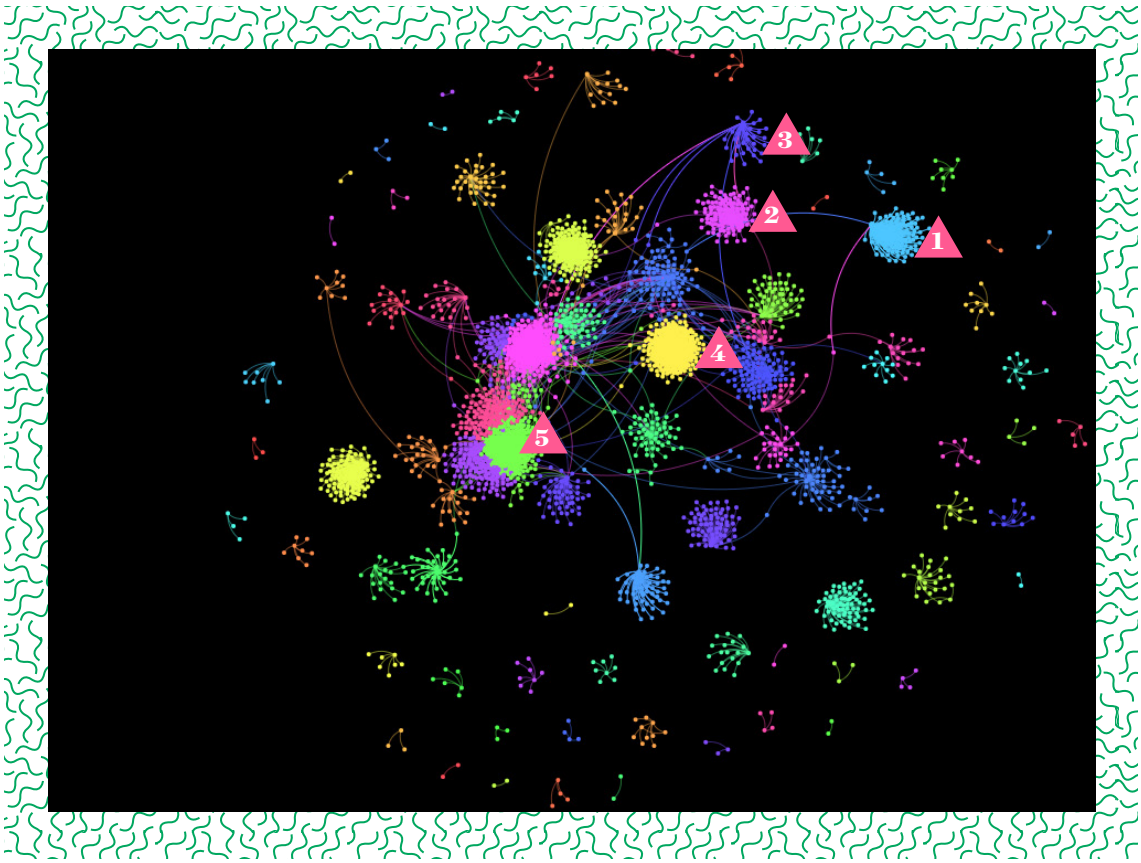


Figure 2.2.2a

Instagram network map for posts using #همجنسگرا

This network of posts and comments provides us with some clues about how networks of Instagram users engage with LGBTQ content, and in particular how non-LGBTQ content producers are attracting engagement on these issues among their largely heterosexual, cisgender audiences.

The group of clusters in the centre-left of the network constitute the network's 'core', containing a number of well-established LGBTQ-related Instagram pages that offer news, resources, translated videos, and images of a near-limitless assortment of topless men. Outside of this 'core' exists an array of accounts that have mentioned homosexuality in passing – both positively and negatively. Let's turn to profile some of the interesting content producers in this network.

1 Iranian poet based in Canada

26,800+ followers

In response to homophobic comments on a previous post, this Canada-based poet pledged to share pictures of gay men kissing every day for a week. Accompanying her post she wrote:

"Get used to seeing love and kisses, although you are accustomed to seeing bleeding, death, killing, executions, and the cutting off of hands, which you have no problems with."

Many comments in response appeared to originate from Iranians who were seemingly not familiar or otherwise engaged with LGBTQ issues. One commenter chimed in to bemoan homophobic attitudes within certain segments of Iranian society:

"Unfortunately, we still do not recognise the truths of creation, and then we cry out for 'death to the dictatorship', while each of us is a dictatorship on the scale of Hitler. I myself am not drawn to the same sex in any way sexually, and perhaps nor is the admin of this page, but that's no reason for us to chant threats and to shout. That's the behaviour of ISIS. It's precisely for this reason that I'm disappointed in my country."

As can be seen in the network map, the large number of blue dots detached from all other nodes in the network suggests that apart from this post, these commenting users were not engaged in any discussions around homosexuality or other LGBTQ-focused content. This indicates that the discussion started by this user helped to stimulate conversations about LGBTQ rights that would otherwise simply not have taken place among their followers.

2 Manoto reporter
80,000+ followers

This Manoto journalist recounted a story about a post-revolutionary salon that catered for much of Iran's liberal intelligentsia in the early 1980s. She describes some of the famous artists and writers who congregated there, and described how it was a progressive space that was open to gay members.

3 A popular page for Iranian atheists and agnostics **8,000+ followers**

In this post, a user responds to an anti-atheist meme that was being shared by religious activists online. The meme attacked a number of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sadegh Hedayat, Bertrand Russell, and Michel Foucault. Foucault was singled out for criticism in the original image as "a faggot who died from AIDS".

Addressing these comments, the atheist and agnostics page stated:

"The term is 'homosexual', not 'faggot'... HIV is sexually transmitted, and even if he was to have contracted it from a woman, Foucault would have died. It's no different [because he's gay], and it's ridiculous."

In response, users generally wrote comments decrying the poor treatment of LGBTQ people in Iran, and expressing solidarity with the community. One user wrote:

"Homosexuality is a natural sensation, and the term should be clarified such that it is not a genetic phenomenon, but is a God-given tendency to affection and love. In response to the homophobia, it is ignorant if you do not distinguish between one who seeks sodomy and one who seeks love... If you think gays are just looking for sodomy, then I ask you why do they fall in love, cry out for love, want to marry and have children?"

Although groups such as these do not have the followership of the figures noted above, this post and the feedback to it hints at the growing recognition within certain secular-leaning segments of society that LGBTQ rights are fundamental human rights.

4 A gay dancer living in Turkey

12,400+ followers

This user is based in Turkey and posts frequent 'confessional'-style videos to his followers, along with clips of his dance performances. He posts regular videos with his friends and his partner, along with frequent user-submitted videos from members of the LGBTQ community.

The videos of the dancer attract a mixture of praise and homophobic scorn from commenters. One particularly aggressive commenter states:

"Faggots are trash and parasites on society, and in their filth they harbour Western language and culture... I hope that as soon as possible, the land will be cleared of the existence of these unclean and dirty ones."

Comments such as this are not rare on the pages of high-profile Iranian LGBTQ people on Instagram, and harassment remains a serious problem for community members in online spaces.

5 A mixture of LGBTQ resource pages and pages to help LGBTQ people (and mostly gay men) to connect with one another

The collection of Instagram pages in this section of the network constitute its 'core'; the users commenting on posts in this segment frequently comment on posts by more than one account in this segment.

Different accounts in this segment of the network provide LGBTQ-related news updates in Persian, with some providing visual resources on online safety, and a large proportion of others dedicated to sharing topless images of models and actors, or sexually suggestive imagery taken from gay pornography. Many of the comments on these posts are from anonymous accounts, with users soliciting for sexual encounters or image exchanges, and inviting direct messages.

Later on we'll dig into some of the security dimensions of users' activities on Instagram, but the key consideration with regard to influence and engagement is that this cluster is populated entirely by LGBTQ content of some variety, and that users in this space are actively seeking out and engaging with this content.

Although the content in these core clusters offer crucial services to LGBTQ people, it is important to recognise that the content produced by the outlier clusters is well-positioned to help shape and inform public discourse about LGBTQ equality, and that high-influence allies of the community can play a powerful role in advancing its objectives.

Small Media also carried out network analysis of other terms relating to the LGBTQ community, but these networks revealed much different dynamics to the network assembled around the hashtag #**همجنسگرا**.

For instance, the hashtag #**لزبین** (#lesbian) is attached to an astonishingly large number of posts and comments – the network shown below contains 99,392 nodes. However, the vast majority of these posts contain pornographic content targeting a male, heterosexual audience. Genuinely lesbian-focused resources are near non-existent in this network, or are are poorly-connected within the network.

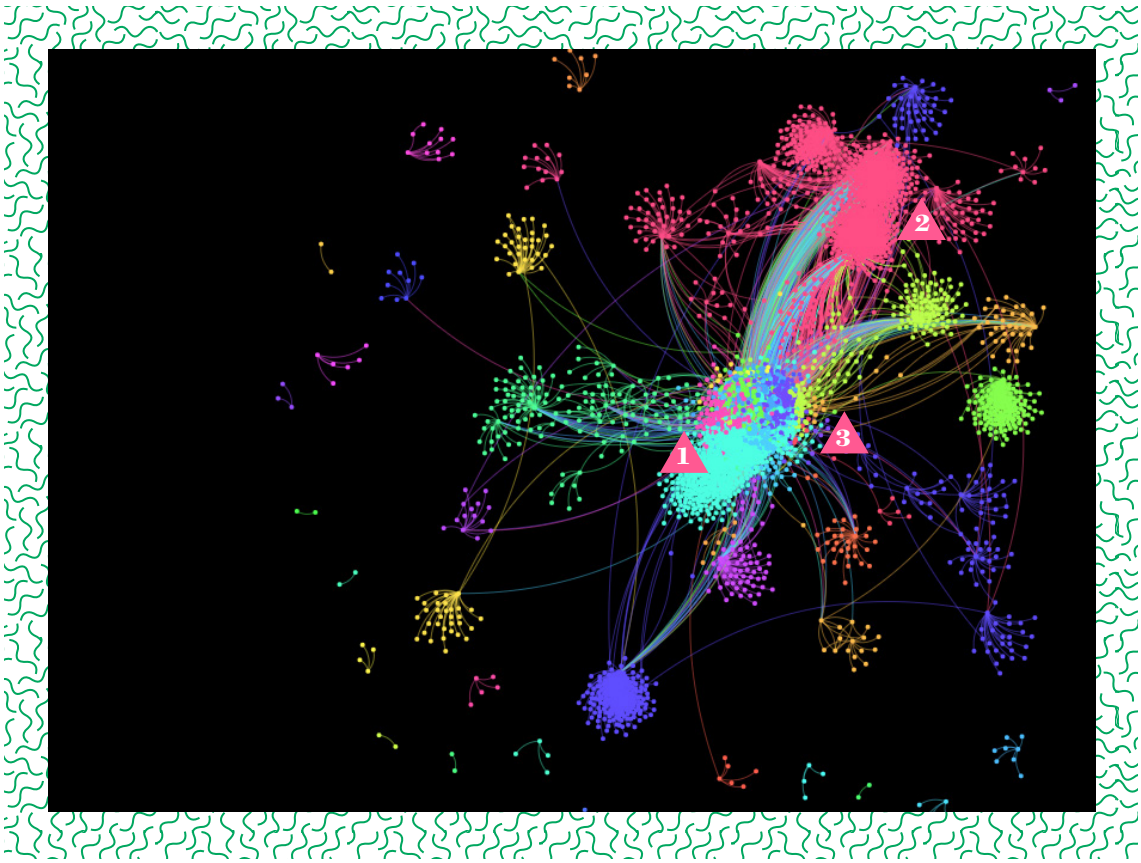


Figure 2.2.2b

Instagram network map for posts using #لزبين

1 Primary clusters of pornographic content

This segment of the network is populated almost entirely by pages sharing soft pornography, generally featuring female same-sex pairings. The content is clearly published with a male audience in mind, and commenters are largely heterosexual men.

2 Secondary clusters of pornographic content

As above, this cluster largely features softcore lesbian pornography geared towards a male target audience. Men and women used a number of popular pages in this cluster to solicit for sex, though a number of the major pages used for this purpose appear to have been removed since this data was gathered, suggesting that they were 'burner' accounts designed to be used and discarded.

3 Lesbian and trans community page and its followers

This tiny cluster contains the page of one of the LGBTQ community's most influential lesbian and trans community hubs. In comparison to the larger array of pornography-centric accounts, this page is rather marginal within the wider network of 'lesbian' content.

2.3
Community Spirit: Existing Online LGBTQ Hubs

Although there are numerous barriers to the open development of LGBTQ community-focused resources in Iran, an online ecosystem of materials does exist to serve the community. The websites and community spaces we highlight in the following section have been developed both inside Iran and across the diaspora community, often through close collaborations between recent LGBTQ refugees and community members still living in the country.

To protect the security of the community pages in question, we will not be referring to them by name, or sharing links to these resources. This section of the report aims instead to map out the gaps in content offered by the existing digital media landscape, and to highlight priority areas for future content development.

2.3.1 ▲ COMMUNITY-WIDE RESOURCES

ONLINE RADIO STATION

An LGBTQ-focused radio station has been operating to support the community since 2013, broadcasting via shortwave and online. The radio station provides content appropriate for all segments of the LGBTQ community, and programmes take a variety of formats, including panel discussions, Q&As with experts, and walkthroughs of key online safety and digital security concepts.

Shows aired by the radio station have included:
Legal Questions: An Iranian lawyer based in Turkey replies to LGBTQ legal questions, covering numerous aspects of Iranian law as it relates to the community in Iran. Advice was also offered to listeners who had been detained by authorities.

Doctor Radio: A series on sexual health was created for gay, lesbian and bisexual listeners, covering a range of STIs including detailed information about HIV.

Bisexuality: A discussion series for bisexuals, discussing some of the challenges and experiences unique to this often-neglected community.

Mental Health Q&A: Exploring issues ranging from the personal through to relationship complications. Listeners ask the questions they're unable to ask openly in Iran.

Sexologist Q&A: A US-based Iranian sexologist produced sex education programmes mainly aimed at bisexual women and lesbians.

Our Gay Campus: A radio drama tells the story of a group of young students who are exploring underground LGBTQ life in Iran. Through the narrative, listeners are provided with information about sexual orientation, sexual health and relationships.

The show broadcasts for seven hours each week, and all content is made available on an accompanying Telegram channel, which has more than 4,000 subscribers. The shortwave broadcasts allow the radio station to share its content with users who would otherwise not go looking for it; whereas a lot of online LGBTQ resources need to be actively sought out, radio broadcasts can more easily be stumbled upon by curious listeners. One listener, a transgender woman named "Raha" described the importance of the radio station for her own self-understanding and development:

"By listening to [the radio station] I learnt not to be embarrassed of who I am but [to] turn those feelings into something more positive by sharing my experiences with other members of the community. A lack of knowledge is the only reason for what happened to me. In the past, no one spoke about his or her experiences, and even if they wanted to there was nowhere they could speak.

[The radio station] is like a gift to us. Everytime I listen to it, I feel I have many brothers and sisters. I feel I am not alone, and that gives me power to fight the miserable situation I am locked in."

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICE

A mental health support service exists to help support the community's mental health needs. The service allows LGBTQ people in Iran to gain access to remote counselling services with mental health professionals based in the Iranian diaspora. Support is free, and interested clients may request an appointment using the service's Telegram channel.

In addition to providing counselling, the support service publishes useful mental health resources on its Instagram and Facebook pages, including articles with titles such as 'How can I learn from my past mistakes?', 'How to talk to others about shyness', and 'Why is self-esteem important?'.

The support service offers this description on its Facebook page:

Individuals with different sexual orientations and gender identities in Iran are considered "offenders" under the Islamic Republic's laws, or at best "sick" and "deviant". Unfortunately, homosexuals, transgender people, bisexuals and other sexual and gender minorities are subjected to violence and physical/psychological harassment by families, as well as by formal organizations such as educational, medical and judicial authorities.

There are no secure and specialised counselling centers in Iran with the aim of providing counselling and psychological support services on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Psychologists and psychiatrists available in Iran are heavily influenced by the predominantly homophobic culture, and clients have often had negative experiences with these counsellors. In the absence of supportive institutions, many cases of violence and abuse have been reported at the hands of counsellors and therapists.

[...]
[The Support Service] offers confidential counselling [to help] you understand your identity and orientation, deal with legal problems, understand gender and individual rights, [navigate] problems relating to family, the workplace, education, and personal relationships. We're ready to render professional services at no cost.

In the absence of easily accessible mental health support services offline (see Chapter 3.2 for more details), such online support services offer a vital lifeline to LGBTQ people who feel they have nowhere to turn to access emergency mental health support. The service has received very positive feedback from the community, with its services being highlighted by a number of interviewees, including the transgender man "Farhad", and "Elina", a lesbian:

"[Mental health] services are very limited, other than the [Support Service] who were very good and professional. They are trustworthy, they are not based inside the country, and are from the community."
"Farhad", transgender man, Iran

"Our psychotherapists are sick... the therapists on Instagram are also full of stereotypes [about LGBTQ people]. That is why [the Support Service] is important."

"Elina", lesbian, Iran

Initiatives such as this should be supported by international LGBTQ organisations to develop their capacities to process enquiries from, and provide support to LGBTQ people, as the service is working incredibly hard to keep up with demand. They should also investigate the possibility of connecting LGBTQ clients in Iran with community-approved psychotherapists, who can be difficult to otherwise identify.

2.3.2 ▲ RESOURCES FOR GAY MEN

GAY ONLINE MAGAZINE

The magazine is primarily targeted at gay men, but also contains content that would be relevant to BTQ men.

The magazine offers this description of its objectives and mission:

▲ We are everywhere, we are free and equal.
▲ We'll bring the rainbow flag everywhere to change the culture about same-sex attraction, diverse sexual orientations and transgender people, and to normalise our presence.
▲ Using personal testimonies, we will advocate for an Iran that offers freedom and equality for LGBTQ people.
▲ By telling our stories of violence and expressing our aspirations, we will contribute to the creation of a true image of Iranian LGBTQ lives inside and outside Iran.
▲ By helping to create a dialogue within Iran, we will help to raise awareness about sexual identities and healthy sexual behaviour.
▲ By promoting a culture of honesty, support and integrity, we will contribute to the creation of a movement for a free and equal Iran.

The main website provides links to the various issues of the monthly magazine, which are available in .pdf format and are hosted on Google Drive. In terms of magazine content, there is a wide variety of content. This includes coverage of politics and gay culture, sexual health information, graphic novels and commentaries. A lot of the imagery in the magazine is sexually explicit.

A large amount of content is translated from other resources, though the original sources are not referenced consistently.

INTERVIEW
"AFSHIN"
PUBLISHER AND REFUGEE

We spoke with "Afshin", the founder of the online gay magazine, who explained to us his mission, his achievements, and some of the challenges that he continues to face as a refugee in Turkey:

Please introduce us to your magazine – when was it established? What are your objectives for it?

I started the magazine a year ago, and we've published eight magazines up until now. It's a mixture of informative, educational and fun content. I would like to make my fellow gay and transgender friends see how the world is, and how their lives could be.

What kind of content do you feature in your magazine?

My English language skills are not bad so I sometimes translate content from English magazines, as well as publishing content from Persian LGBTQ media.
I lived in Iran so I try to use my own experiences and taste to justify the content. I have a lot of free time here in Turkey, so I try to be positive.

How do you distribute and share your magazine? What role does social media play in this?

We have a website as well as a Telegram channel and an Instagram account. I also produce a lighter version of the magazine so that people with low speed internet can access it. The magazine went viral since we started our Telegram channel, so Telegram plays a very important role in this.

What risks do you face running and sharing this magazine? How do you manage these risks?

I am a refugee here in Turkey. So obviously it is not easy to publish an underground magazine under the current situation here. Publishing a magazine without permission from the state is illegal. Even though my target audience is not based in Turkey, I always live with the fear of [the Turkish government] as well as the government inside Iran. I am always afraid of my identity being revealed by the regime.

Have you received threats from authorities? Online or offline? Are you worried about being identified?

No. We get some spam emails or abusive comments on our Instagram page, but I don't take them seriously

What kind of feedback have you received about the magazine from readers? What do you want to do with it in the future?

Because the magazine is very colourful and fun as well as informative I receive loads of good feedback from people who are fed up with hardcore informative contents. I do all of this on my own with no money. So of course if I had an income, I could focus on the magazine rather than labouring in a factory.

The magazine also shares content from other Iranian LGBTQ community spaces such as 6Rang, and international organisations such as Outright International.

The magazine is very well-integrated with social media, and runs an Instagram campaign named #I_Am_LGBTQ based on user submissions. It also operates a Telegram bot that allows users access to specific magazines and online resources.

'BOYFRIENDS' INSTAGRAM BLOGGERS

Two particularly popular Instagram accounts claim to be managed by two gay men in a long-term relationship. They share illustrated images of gay couples and memes relating to LGBTQ rights, and accompany their posts with lengthy narrative descriptions recounting their daily routines, the state of their relationship, and the challenges they have faced around family rejection and homophobia.

The posts attract a great deal of commentary and discussion from LGBTQ followers (typically more than 150 comments per post), and particularly from gay men who have endured similar experiences. Although it is unclear whether or not the two men actually exist (both produce content in high volumes—often multiple long-form written posts per day—and their posts share a very consistent aesthetic), the comments beneath their posts demonstrate that their narrative posts provide a valuable outlet for LGBTQ people to share their own experiences of love, rejection, and uncertainty in line with the narratives being produced by these two Instagram bloggers.

Although Iran's traditional 'blogosphere' is now long-dead,[25] pages such as these are natural successors in terms of style, language, and purpose. LGBTQ authors are continuing to write about their loves, losses, and fears for the future, and continue to attract substantial followings—the venue has merely changed.

2.3.3 ▲ RESOURCES FOR LESBIANS

LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY PORTAL

This is a community website established by a leading LGBTQ and feminist activist, with a focus on providing resources to lesbian and transgender Iranians. The organisation's 'About Us' page reads:

25 Giacobino, L., Abadpour, A., Anderson, C., Petrossian F., and Nellemann, C., (2014), 'Whither Blogestan: Evaluating Shifts in Persian Cyberspace,' available at: http://bit.ly/2w871s6

We have seen many so-called scientific articles, nonsense reports and Iranian media analysis calling homosexuals sick people, humiliating them, and marginalising them.

We have been witness to the criminalisation of love between same-sex people in our society, and the result has been nothing other than the ruin of many homosexuals' lives. Those who are forced to get married, commit suicide, or seek a 'legal' identity undergoing gender reassignment surgeries and subjecting their souls and bodies to the surgical knife.

Today, many of us are aware that our sexual orientation is natural, and with faith in our natural right to love a person of our own sex, we are trying together to open a window to a future without prejudice, "morality" and "immorality"; a window to a world where our sisters and daughters have no fear of showing their sexual orientation.

For the first time in the history of our country, we want to open a new chapter in the fight of Iranian homosexuals—and specifically lesbian women—against homophobia. We want to sit together, get to know each other in person, and exchange our experiences in support of one another.

The organisation has published a series of extensive research reports on the experiences of the lesbian and transgender communities in Iran, and performs international rights advocacy work alongside its provision of services and online resources to its target communities.

Site content is updated semi-regularly, and covers topics including international news, community news, literature and poetry, personal testimonies, and legal documentation and analysis. The site reports on transgender and lesbian news from Iran, including a play staged in Tehran based around an individual's transition. Coverage of international LGBTQ news has included the rise of anti-LGBTQ violence and rhetoric in Indonesia, and developments in the recognition of intersex people in Syria.

The website contains articles and resources for lesbian and transgender readers, though there is a focus on news articles and documentation rather than practical resource provision. Resources do exist on mental health, sexual health, and digital security, but there exists potential for them to be updated and made more accessible to community members.

Figure 2.3.3a

A video of support from an Iranian pop singer, Sheri M.

The page operates active social media pages, including Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram, where links to news articles and opinion pieces from the site's authors are shared alongside stories and resources from the Persian and English-language news media. The site also runs a number of campaigns in support of LGBTQ rights. One, named 'Yes to Change!' collects video messages from Iranian public figures, celebrities and political activists in support of LGBTQ rights in Iran. Past advocates have included the lesbian Manoto journalist Aram Bolandpaz, the pop singer Sheri M, and the poet Fateme Ekhtesari.

CLOSED LESBIAN FACEBOOK GROUPS

Apart from the community hub described above, public online spaces for lesbians are few and far between. Rather than congregating on apps or on public social media platforms such as Telegram, lesbian (and bisexual) women tend to make use of closed platforms such as private, invitation-only Facebook and Telegram groups. This pattern of cautious social media usage appears to have grown out of a perceived vulnerability to entrapment, exploitation and abuse online. Examples of entrapment were documented in Outright International's report *Being Lesbian in Iran*, where one

woman was blackmailed into performing cybersex after revealing her sexual orientation to a man posing as a lesbian online[26].

One lesbian and bisexual interview participants described some of the measures they took to protect themselves from such threats:

"I try to not to find new friends or to be in contact on Internet and if there is someone I do not know, the person should have already been a friend of my friend in the real world. Like, my friend should know the person in real life. I do not accept any new person's friend requests on Facebook, I do not answer unknown people on Telegram, and do not use dating channels or groups on Telegram. I used to, but no more."

"Azadeh", bisexual woman, Iran

The closed nature of many online communities of lesbian and bisexual women makes the development and dissemination of resources among these groups particularly challenging.

Engagements with the community in Iran by international support organisations must take place through direct collaborations with community members and leaders,

2.3.4 ▲ RESOURCES FOR BISEXUALS AND PANSEXUALS

BISEXUAL AND PANSEXUAL COMMUNITY PORTAL

A community portal for Iranian bisexuals and pansexuals offers access to a range of resources for these underserved groups. The site's 'About Us' page states the following:

[REDACTED] is the first information website on bisexuality and pansexuality in Persian. Our objective is to fill the existing gaps online, and to provide users with updated information about this sexual orientation, and transform the common prejudices and biphobia in order to give bisexuality and pansexuality its proper place in the spectrum of sexuality in the Persian LGBTQI world.

[REDACTED] will attain its objectives with your help and collaboration by:

▲ Introducing websites, networks and active groups relating to bisexuality and pansexuality.

▲ Translation of academic articles and content.

26 Outright International, (2016), 'Being Lesbian in Iran', available at: http://bit.ly/2w2qBpD p. 34

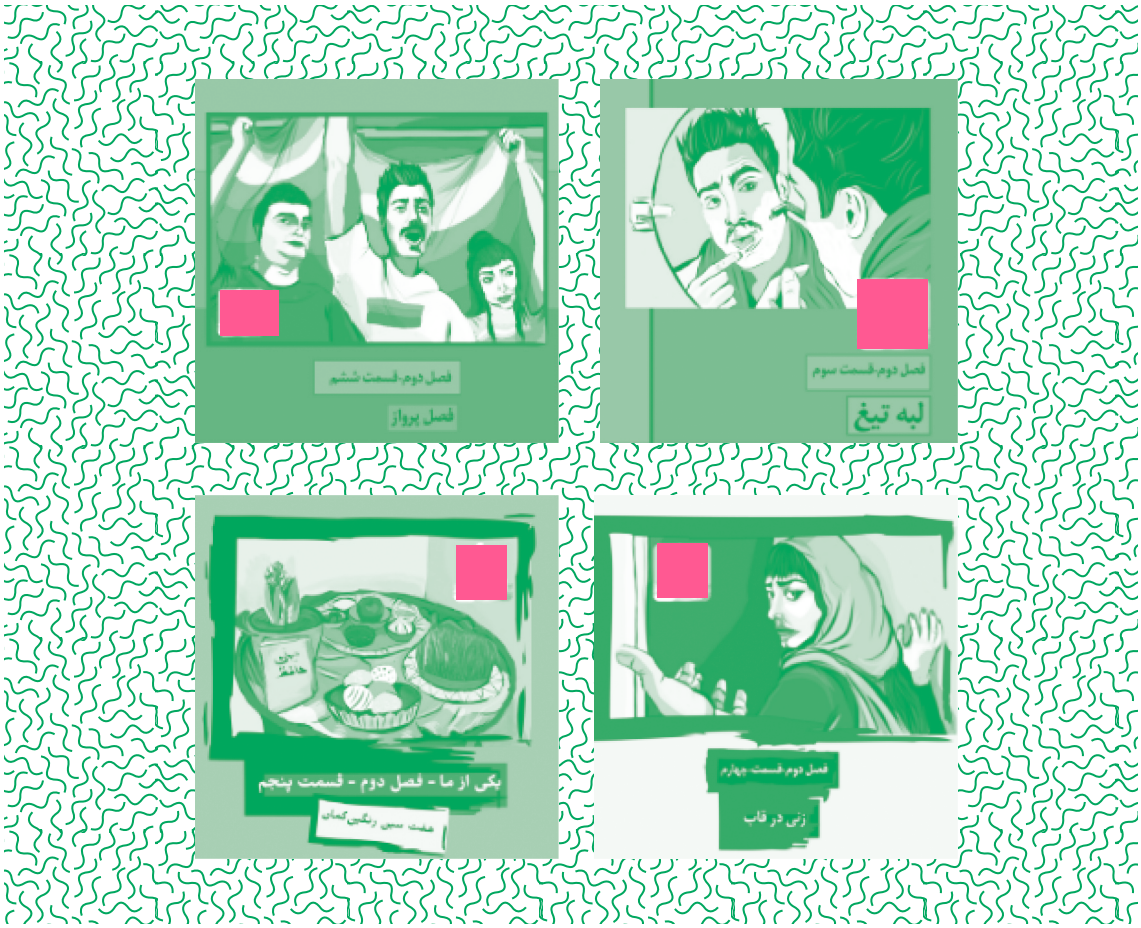


Figure 2.3.4a

The LGBTQ webcomic hosted on the bisexual community portal

▲ Production of podcasts and short videos.

▲ Webinars and online talks featuring experts.

The page hosts a number of articles about bisexuality and pansexuality, and criticises bisexual erasure and biphobia within the wider LGTQ community. As well as hosting articles and acting as an information resource, the portal hosts a fortnightly webcomic telling the story of a lesbian in Iran and her group of transgender and bisexual friends.

The original webcomic tackles an array of different issues, including suicide, domestic violence, forced marriage and asylum, and delivers some practical digital security tips within its narrative. The webcomic is also regularly shared on Instagram, where it has more than 340 followers.

The page has also produced video content explaining key LGBTQ vocabulary for viewers in an accessible and digestible format, including profiles of sexual orientations, gender identities, and the

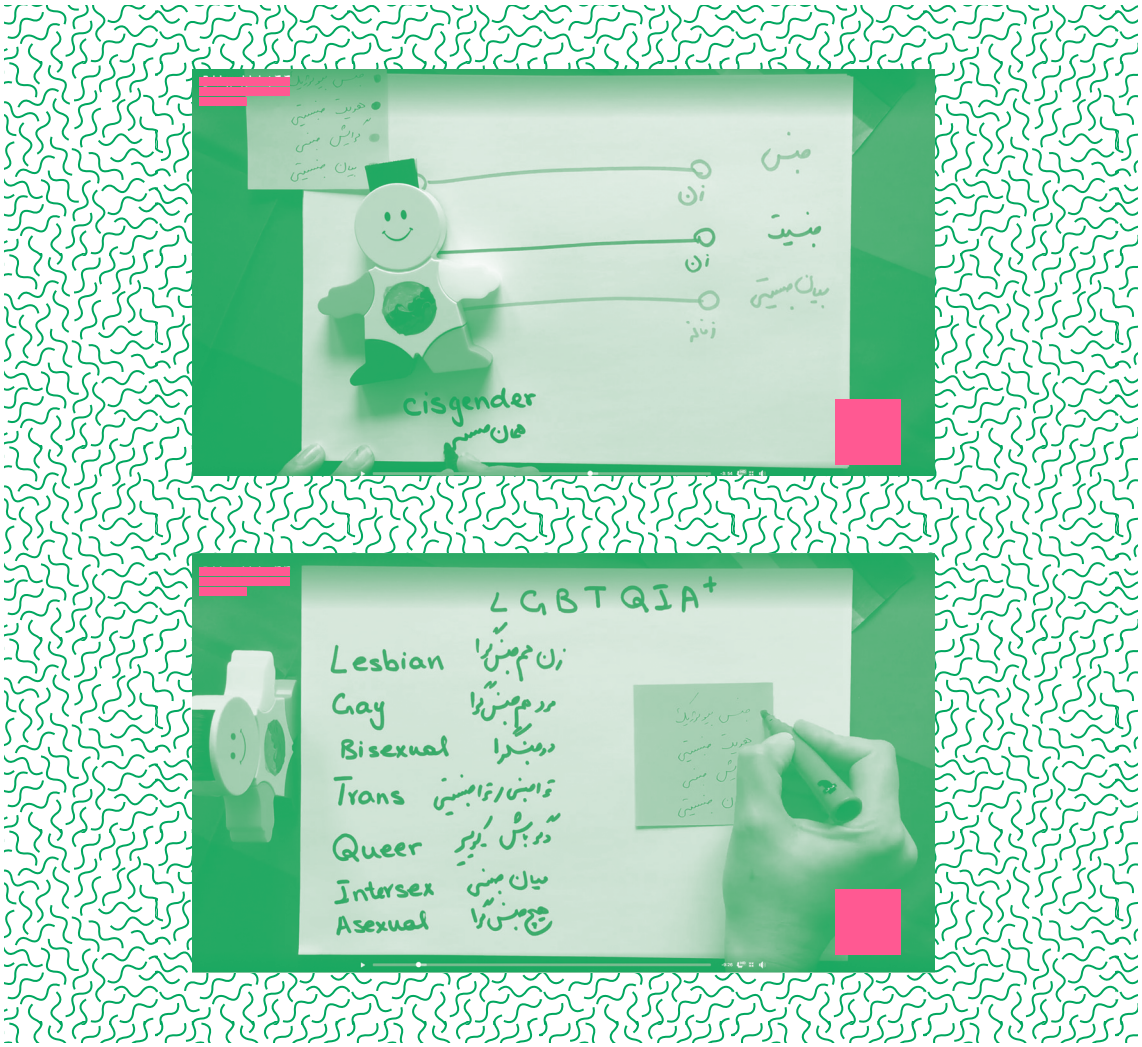


Figure 2.3.4b

Videos produced by the bisexual community portal, and shared on its social media channels

concept of the gender binary. These videos have been shared more widely than many other items of content on the page's Facebook page and Telegram channel.

2.3.5 ▲ RESOURCES FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

TRANSITION INFORMATION CENTRE

The Transition Information Centre is an independent website focusing on education, cultural change, and the provision of information on transgender and transsexual individuals, as well as sex change surgery in Iran. The site states that:

"The objective and aim of this website is to increase knowledge on gender identity disorder, sensibilisation / cultural change, the translation of scientific articles, and interviews and life stories from Iranian trans individuals."

Figure 2.3.5a

Content produced by the Transition Information Centre, and shared on Instagram

Users can engage with the website through email and social media, and the site administrator is generally very responsive.

Most of the website's content consists of information on gender reassignment surgery surgery and hormone therapy. This often includes descriptions of outcomes, and interviews with individuals that have undertaken either of these.

Social media posts tend to consist of tutorials and advice for trans individuals. These include an Instagram post providing illustrated medical advice for transgender men, and post-surgery care advice from doctors, including one post on post-mastectomy care, and another on post-vaginoplasty care. All of these resources are well-translated, practical and informative.

ONLINE TRANSGENDER SUPPORT CENTRE

An Online Transgender Support Centre, operated by transgender advocates living inside Iran offers a massive array of content to transgender users, including news, educational resources, blogs and user-provided content, podcasts, a forum, and health information. An online forum functions as a community space allowing transgender people to exchange experiences, and ask questions free from judgement. The forum contains sub-forums on topics ranging from medical information, to international transgender rights news, to religious questions and concerns.

As well as sharing national and international news about transgender rights, posts from an officially registered Iranian

transgender NGO is also posted on the website.

The website has a simple and interactive design, with a well-organised menu and clear, informative language.

The Support Centre has a strong social media presence, frequently sharing information about campaigns and links to transgender rights-related content. Examples of content include a link to a trans-focused short documentary video called 'Headspace', which shines a light on some of the common challenges faced by trans people that non-trans individuals might not be aware of. There are also links to pictures of people's ongoing transitions over a period of months, and one post calling for trans people to submit their coming-out experiences via a Telegram bot.

Although the Support Centre offers a huge range of resources for the trans community, and was referenced by two of our transgender interviewees, one interviewee also criticised it for its narrow focus on gender reassignment surgery as the end point for trans people. "Sepideh", a transwoman said:

"[The Support Centre] is in line with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and encourages everyone to operate. At the psychological level, it gives trans people the right to exist, and tells them there is nothing wrong with them, and even doesn't use the term "sickness". It's good in that respect, but when you go deeper, if they want to give you a solution it's surgery."

"Sepideh", transgender woman, Iran

2.4
Observations: Identity and Community Development

On the basis of our surveys and conversations with LGBTQ people, our overview of community activities on Instagram and Telegram, and our appraisal of existing community resources, we can say that the LGBTQ community has developed in confidence, organisation and optimism since our last report in 2013. Although enormous challenges still exist in the form of state violence, harassment and homophobia, we have observed a number of positive signs that the tide is beginning to turn against state-directed homophobia and community repression:

▲ **More and more Iranian young people appear to be coming out to their peers than ever before, with some young LGBTQ people making themselves visible on social media platforms. Iranian LGBTQ organisations should produce resources to support them to do so as safely as possible.**

Our survey results and observations from our interviewees and focus group participants suggest that Iranian teens are coming out in greater numbers than ever before. It is encouraging that young Iranians are starting to feel confident enough to talk openly about their sexual orientations and gender identities, and that some of them are finding support from their friends and families.

At the same time, some teens are taking huge risks by speaking so honestly at a time when same-sex activity is still criminalised, and where anti-LGBTQ sentiments are still so widespread. Although the bravery of young LGBTQ people should be commended, LGBTQ content producers should create resources for younger people who are considering coming out, offering them context-sensitive advice around online and personal safety.

▲ **The LGBTQ community is attracting more public advocates to its cause, who are helping to reshape public opinion. LGBTQ rights advocates should work with other 'influencers' to help bring discussions about LGBTQ rights into the mainstream, whether they be movie stars, pop stars, TV personalities, or Instagram power users.**

Over the past few years, more and more high-profile Iranians have pushed for recognition of LGBTQ rights, including the megastar pop diva Googoosh, and the TV and film actress Behnoush Bakhtiari. Other personalities in the Persian diaspora media have even come out publicly, including the Manoto journalist Aram Bolandpaz. At the same time, high-influence users of social media platforms such as Instagram have also been adept at introducing LGBTQ issues into the timelines of users who would otherwise not be interested or engaged in questions of LGBTQ rights.

International and Iranian LGBTQ rights advocates should work with and lobby influential public figures to start talking about LGBTQ rights, and to offer support to the community in its struggle for societal acceptance.

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations should invest resources in further developing existing community hubs, and helping them to create engaging and original multimedia content**

that addresses the community's challenges, while remaining grounded in the Iranian context.

Existing community spaces do incredible work providing information to LGBTQ people that is not available in any offline spaces in Iran. The resources they provide are invaluable for LGBTQ people navigating the challenges of coming out, dating, managing relationships, or in some cases going through lengthy and complex gender reassignment procedures. These spaces should be supported to continue their work, and to transmit valuable knowledge to the community.

At the same time, they should be supported to innovate, and to produce content that is engaging, attention-grabbing, and grounded in the context of Iran. Too often, owing to a lack of resources, community sites are dependant upon translations of content from English-language sources, which are blind to the cultural, social, and legal specificites of Iran.

Also, innovative models of service provision—such as the use of Telegram bots—should be supported to assist in the delivery of in-demand services such as sexual health advice, mental health support, and digital security support.

3

Movement Building

URGENT PRIORITIES FOR DIGITAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

The legal restrictions imposed on the Iranian LGBTQ community outlined in Chapter 1 of this report are ultimately responsible for creating an atmosphere of fear, paranoia and secrecy on the part of LGBTQ citizens by exposing them to the threats of arrest, prosecution, and punitive punishment.

Yet on a daily basis, it is not these legal restrictions that necessarily weigh heaviest on community members' minds — not for the teenage lesbian who is consumed by fear about her parents learning about her sexuality, or for the struggling trans woman who lacks access to appropriate mental health resources. The same could be said for the gay twenty-something who does not know how to access sexual health testing services, and who finds it easier to remain in the dark about his HIV status.

Our analysis in Chapter 2 demonstrated that the LGBTQ community is growing in confidence, is starting to amass influential allies, and is developing rich and sophisticated community hubs and institutions. Yet despite these advances, activists and advocates still lack the resources and the the capacities to tackle all of these challenges head-on.

In this chapter, we'll discuss some of the everyday challenges faced by the LGBTQ community as a result of societal prejudices, public service deficiencies, and a lack of appropriate knowledge, even among medical professionals. Our analysis is primarily based on focus groups and interviews with respondents based in Iran and Turkey, and is supplemented by online surveys and desk research.

After identifying these problems we'll offer some recommendations for how international LGBTQ organisations, Iranian community groups, and technology companies might be able to work together with the community to better address the challenges it faces.

3.1
Sexual Health

In this section, we discuss the state of sexual health services in Iran, specifically with reference to the country's sexual minority populations. We identify several gaps in resource provision that need to be addressed urgently to support LGBTQ citizens to understand sexual health risks, to prevent and mitigate them where possible, and to access safe forms of treatment where necessary.

We approach these questions by first assessing the sexual health services currently on offer in Iran, and highlight how institutional barriers have prevented them being accessed by marginalised communities, including LGBTQ people.

3.1.1 ▲ THE STATE OF SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES

Before turning to LGBTQ-specific services, it's worth noting that sexual health provision in Iran is limited even for the country's heterosexual, cisgender majority. Before moving on to examine the challenges specific to the LGBTQ community, let's take a moment to map out the broader deficiencies in sexual health provision in Iran.

Crucially, social conservatism and taboos around premarital sexual activity (and some forms of marital sexual activity) are a huge barrier to access of sexual health services, particularly for women. For example, a 2014 article from a group of Iranian reproductive health professionals described how cultural conservatism and a lack of trust in health professionals to maintain clients' privacy has led some sexually active adolescent girls to avoid sexual health services altogether, for fear of being reported to their parents.[27]

Similarly, a comprehensive 2013 analysis of sexual health provision noted that a combination of structural health service deficiencies and social and cultural barriers were creating a generation of young people with only the very faintest comprehension of sexual health. Commenting on the paralysing nature of social conservatism on the debate, one professor noted:

"Many of the adults don't even know how to name their sex organs. Kids are instructed to name their eyes, ears, hands, feet, but they do not know how to name their "?"... Maybe we should start with the parents."[28]

Echoing this point, the report authors noted that the influence of conservative religious values were holding back the provision of essential services to underserved populations (for example in rural areas):

27 Shariati M, Babazadeh R, Mousavi SA, et al, (2014), 'Iranian adolescent girls' barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services: a qualitative study', Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care, available at: http://bit.ly/2KpTJtJ

28 Akbari, N, Ramezankhani, A, Pazargadi, M, (2013), 'Accelerators/decelerators of achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health services: a case study of Iranian health system', BMC Health Services Research 2013, pp. 13:241, available at: http://bit.ly/2jiBdaB

"Conservative trends present challenges to advancing sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights... Religious interpretations are used to justify restrictions on sexual and reproductive health education and services, especially sexuality education and services for adolescents, and safe abortion."

The paper notes specifically that:

"People who are most vulnerable to sexual and reproductive ill-health are those who have been most extensively deprived from sexual and reproductive health services".

Though this statement is broadly in reference to marginalised adolescent girls (and particularly rural populations), it certainly applies at least as equally to Iran's LGBTQ citizens. It adds that in order to improve the quality of care to Iranian citizens, a patient-centred approach needs to be introduced into the Iranian health service:

"Providers need to be aware of their patients' cultural values, social concerns and individual needs. Patients usually determine quality of care based on: acceptable waiting times, convenient opening hours, confidential relationships, availability of gender-sensitive services, continuity of services, choice of contraceptive method, and being treated with dignity and respect."

These determinants of quality of care are not much different for LGBTQ patients. They seek the provision of confidential services, by well-trained professionals who possess knowledge about the specific needs of sexual minorities, and who act respectfully, refraining from moral judgement.

We spoke about the current state of Iranian sexual health service provision with Dr. Arash Alaei, a leading specialist in HIV/AIDS research and treatment who was imprisoned in Iran between 2008-11 for his work running HIV/AIDS clinics. He was charged with 'communications with an enemy government'. In conversation with Small Media, Dr. Alaei noted that despite its overall strengths, Iran's health service contains huge service gaps in relation to sexual health:

"You know, the issue in the healthcare system in Iran is that it's one of the most unique services in MENA and Central Asia. It's got very strong, high-quality general healthcare [services]. But there are a number of gaps, one of which is that there is zero sex education, or safe sex education, or sexual services overall.

Iran has one of the strongest family planning programmes, but again the gap in family planning is that it's only for population control, not for safe sex education about sexual relations."

Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

The incorporation of the Iranian health service's limited sexual health information provision into Iran's family planning services naturally discourages engagement from LGBTQ people who are not in a position to use these services.

In this sense, the cultural conservatism that denies the existence or acceptability of sexual activity outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage acts as an obstacle to access among marginalised, high-risk populations, while also conditioning the health service itself to exclude core sexual health services from its remit. It is in this context that LGBTQ people must often seek sexual health education and support outside official health services.

3.1.2 ▲ SILENCE = DEATH: LGBTQ ACCESS TO SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Through a series of conversations and surveys we conducted with Iranian LGBTQ participants and sexual health experts, we documented a number of obstacles to access to sexual health services and resources. Without access to appropriate information about STIs or practical safe sex advice, or to targeted and appropriate treatment, Iranian LGBTQ people are at exceptionally high risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infections.

Despite the non-existence of official sexual health services in Iran, some pioneering initiatives have previously sought to provide appropriate care to the LGBTQ community. Dr. Arash Alaei, his brother Dr. Kamiar Alaei and a number of their colleagues were pioneers of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in the late 1990s. In 1997 they set up a pilot clinic in Kermanshah to help deal with that city's emerging HIV crisis. The 'triangular clinic' system that they established would go on to serve as the most effective and

influential model of HIV intervention practiced in Iran.[29] The service was fully integrated within a health centre, allowing patients to use it without fear of stigma, and offered a host of community-based services for populations at risk of exposure to HIV. In our interview with Dr. Alaei, he explained how the system worked:

"When we established the first model of community-based services in HIV, we created that model. When I say 'we' I mean my brother, myself and two other people. We named it 'triangular' because of its three angles: the first for people living with HIV/AIDS, the second for injecting drug users, and the third for sexually transmitted infections.

When we put 'sexually transmitted', we had the idea that we wanted to offer services to LGBT people without any stigma, or discrimination, or challenges from the constitution and government. So we didn't identify them – if you look at that service's forms, we didn't identify sexual behaviours or sexual relations. We just put that if you have any questions, or wanted to receive a service because of sexual relations, you can approach this third angle. This was the HIV service."

Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

Although this service was providing consistent support to MSM (men who have sex with men) and other members of the LGBTQ community, it was forced to carry out this work surreptitiously, never advertising its services or intent publicly. Instead, the clinic ran on a community-based model, harnessing a network of outreach workers who were embedded in the LGBTQ community. Although Dr. Arash Alaei has been living outside of Iran since 2011, he notes that similar dynamics mask the service provision of under-the-radar sexual health clinics operating in Iran today:

"We had a number of outreach workers who were from the MSM community, the sex worker community, and they had strong networks. But we didn't have any opportunities to announce our services or publicise them – not only at that time, but even today if you search there is no publicity [about sexual health services], and this is an issue.

29 Detailed assessments of the 'triangular clinic' model trialled in Kermanshah have been published by Harvard Medical School and the World Health Organisation, and are available here:
Talbot JR, Bohrer M, Rhatigan J., (2011), 'Iran's Triangular Clinic', *Global Health Delivery 006*, available at http://bit.ly/2raBsce
World Health Organisation, (2004), 'Best practice in HIV/AIDS prevention and care for injecting drug abusers The Triangular Clinic in Kermanshah, Islamic Republic of Iran', available at: http://bit.ly/2w13g7v

Services are sometimes available – sometimes high-quality services are available – but the issue is the accessibility of [these] services, and because of legal barriers and the constitution they cannot introduce these services to society."

Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

Dr. Alaei described the staggering human cost of this silence, stating that an estimated 70% of all HIV infections are going undetected in Iran as a result of inadequate public engagement on testing – in particular for MSM and other LGBTQ populations. Talking about whether lessons from the 'triangular clinic' model have been adapted into the Iranian health service, he said:

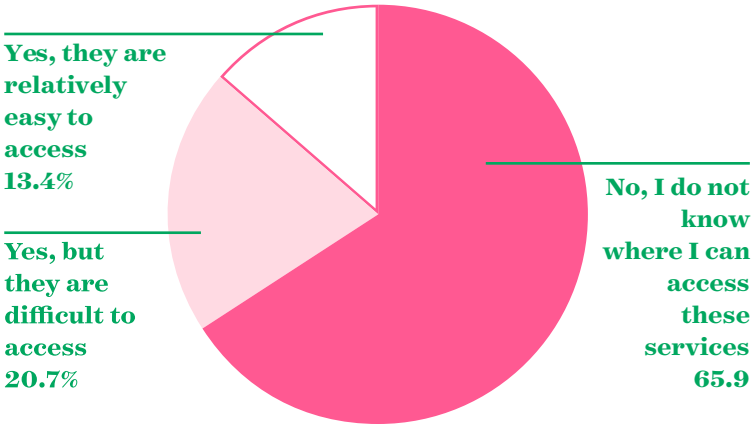
"It depends which key population you wanted to talk about. If you wanted to talk about people that inject drugs, I think that [Iran has] one of the best and most unique models that you can see in the region. If you wanted to talk about continued care for people living with HIV/AIDS, then again – fantastic.

The issue they have is engagement for testing overall, because they have a 70% diagnosis gap. So there are 30,000 registered cases, but 100,000 estimated cases – they have this gap because they cannot publicise [testing]; there are no advertisements or information for the general population. For LGBT people there's a very huge gap, because again they cannot say "We are here to offer a service to MSM"".

Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

Above all, the primary barrier to improving LGBTQ people's access to sexual health services is silence – from society, from health professionals, and from LGBTQ people themselves. The extremely discreet nature of existing sexual health services in Iran makes it difficult for Iranian LGBTQ people to know where to go for testing, or which practitioners they can trust. To test some of the hypotheses made by Dr. Alaei, we surveyed 314 Iranian LGBTQ people about their engagements with sexual health services. We now turn to their experiences of engaging with the Iranian system.

Do you have access to sexual health services?



Do you know where you can go for online Persian-language sexual health resources and support?

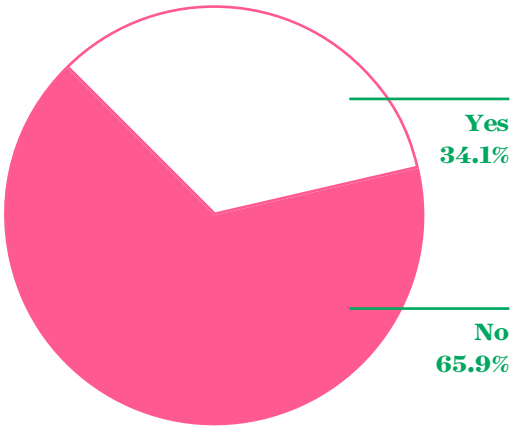


Figure 3.1.3a

Our survey results demonstrated severe challenges around access to sexual health services, both online and offline.

Figure 3.1.3b

A majority of respondents also did not know where to find sexual health resources online

3.1.3 ▲ NOWHERE TO TURN: COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES WITH SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES

We surveyed 314 LGBTQ Iranians to enquire about their access to sexual health resources and their experiences engaging with sexual health support services. Of this sample, 65.9% did not know where they could go to access Persian-language sexual health resources online, and 65.9% do not even know where they could access sexual health services if they were needed [see Figure 3.1.3a].[30]

30 For the full results of this survey, along with more details about our methodology, see Annex 1.

A key issue preventing LGBTQ people from accessing sexual health services in Iran appears to be a lack of trust in sexual health practitioners. Only 8.9% of respondents had disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to a sexual health practitioner. Of those who had not, 28.6% stated that they refrained from discussing their sexuality or gender identity for fear of negative consequences. Only 4.5% of respondents thought sexual health providers were generally well-informed about the needs of LGBTQ people.

It wasn't just the health service that came in for criticism, however. Several focus group participants also criticised the current lack of availability of online sexual health resources, and stated that it was particularly challenging to access sexual health resources online in Persian. One participant noted that even when Persian-language content exists, it can be riddled with inaccuracies:

"I think many people search [for information] among English-language content. I have personally researched and read very little in Persian, because what I have read was either incorrect or inaccessible."
"Shirin", bisexual woman, Canada

Another respondent based in Iran noted that certain websites and resources had emerged to fill the sexual health niche, though the landscape remains thinly populated. They noted that Islamic information portals developed inside Iran such as Tebyan[31] do host some relevant content, but that it is so conservatively framed as to make it useless for LGBTQ users:

"[An online radio station] was the first resource whose content was fairly informative, then [the radio show] Avishan began. Other than these two resources, I have never got any answers from other websites. Tebyan is one of the resources inside Iran, but their content is very much conservative, and its content is censored."
"Azadeh", bisexual woman, Iran

Other respondents contested these claims, suggesting that if one were to look actively for sexual health resources, they are not so difficult to find. In our focus group of gay men, one respondent noted that a greater problem than a lack of resources was that gay

31 Tebyan is the website of Iran's Tebyan Cultural Institute, a prominent cultural organisation in Iran. The Tebyan site operates as an Islamic lifestyle portal, offering resources on health, parenting, finances, and even online dating. Tebyan is affiliated with the Islamic Propagation Organisation.

men still too often do not give enough thought to the risks of HIV and other STIs, or the necessity of practising safe sex:

Hamid: *Because I'm always worried about HIV, I think there's enough content for people like me who always have questions about the virus. Whatever question I search for [online], there's an answer for it.*

Hossein: *But it's not about the number of articles or accessibility... the reality is that Iranian gays don't care about it. I know lots of people—close friends—they don't use condoms at all.*
Hamid & Hossein, gay male focus group, Turkey

It is also worth mentioning that sexual health resources for gay men do appear to me more comprehensive than for other sub-communities: a number of the online community spaces for gay men profiled in Chapter 2.3 do feature comprehensive sexual health materials.

Another respondent echoed concerns that social conservatism had a terrible chilling effect on discussions around sexual health, suggesting that any meaningful change must start within the family and the state education system. They also noted that online resources for the community remained sparse:

"The first source of information on sexual health should be at home within the family, and then in school so that we can actually learn things. We don't have these [sources] in Iran."

"With regard to the media, there's some information about sexual diseases and some other FAQs on various Persian-language websites, with shorter or longer answers. But I only know of Avishan as a website specifically addressing all of these different sexual health issues for LGBT people. There might be another [site] out there, but I don't know of it—and this is an issue on its own: that if there is something out there, why don't I know about it?"
'Leila', bisexual woman, Denmark

The testimonies from our focus groups, interviews and our survey respondents largely confirm Dr. Alaei's analysis: around two-thirds of survey respondents did not know where to access sexual health resources or support either online or offline, and those who did know where to find online Persian-language resources were frequently unimpressed by their deficiencies in rigour and comprehensiveness.

What, then, might be done to address some of these challenges?

3.1.4 ▲ RECOMMENDATIONS: SEXUAL HEALTH

The challenges outlined by LGBTQ community members and sexual health experts will not be easily overcome. Social conservatism is a deep-rooted barrier to honest and healthy discussions around sexual health, but it is not insurmountable. Similarly, although sexual health services are largely operating under the radar in Iran, this does not mean that LGBTQ people could not be equipped with information that would allow them to access these services more easily.

With this in mind, here are some suggestions for future tech-driven initiatives that could support the sexual health of LGBTQ citizens in Iran:

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations and local community groups should work together to connect LGBTQ people with community-friendly clinics and support networks.**

Sexual health services do exist in Iran, even if they are officially unavailable to unmarried individuals in the view of the Iranian health service. But as Dr. Alaei points out, community-driven, peer-based support has been provided by sexual health practitioners, and the opportunity now exists for tech solutions such as Telegram groups to help accelerate and augment such LGBTQ outreach processes.

"We need to figure out how we can come from the outside and highlight services and connect [LGBTQ people] with local services. For example, I know at least 20 doctors who are ready to help LGBTQ patients, but maybe [the community] doesn't know about them. And those doctors can't publicly announce or advertise their services. So that should be our job – to understand how we can support those guys to connect."
Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations should support the development of comprehensive and accessible online sexual health resources.**

As became evident from our community survey, around two thirds of LGBTQ respondents did not know where they could go to find sexual health resources online. Other interviewees and focus group participants commented that they were only aware of a handful of high-quality resources available in Persian, and that other

Persian-language resources were either inaccurate or inappropriate for LGBTQ readers.

As such, it is imperative that sexual health experts and campaigners are supported to produce accessible, engaging, and comprehensive resources targeted towards the LGBTQ community.

▲ **LGBTQ advocacy organisations down taboos by engaging meaningfully with influencers – whether public figures or liberal religious leaders.**

Intervention programmes in other socially conservative contexts have achieved some successes by engaging liberal-minded religious leaders to influence their communities in favour of sexual health testing and even tolerance for LGBTQ people. Dr. Alaei argued that only religious leaders have the political clout and cultural influence to bring about changes in the treatment of LGBTQ citizens:

"In conservative social settings such as Iran, we definitely need religious leaders [to be involved]. There is no way to have doctors involved because doctors can't solve this issue – they don't have a proper voice in Iran's case. So we [should] involve religious leaders – those religious leaders who are more liberal – and talk to them, and involve them.

In [a project in] Beirut we had a religious leader who officially accepted MSM. We know this is a huge statement, but he accepted it and he said that we need to help them, and that they are members of our community that we cannot ignore."

Dr. Arash Alaei, Former Director, Global Institute for Health and Human Rights

Similarly, it is important to engage key cultural influencers in the diaspora to carry useful messages about sexual health to Iranian viewers – including LGBTQ viewers. In this regard, broadcasters such as BBC Persian and Manoto can and should play a hugely influential role.

3.2
Mental Health

LGBTQ people wordwide suffer from far higher levels of mental illness than cisgender and heterosexual people, as demonstrated by numerous studies from the Global North.[32] The lack of substantive scientific studies on LGBTQ mental health from Iran should come as little surprise given the social and cultural taboos that exist around LGBTQ issues, and the suppression of sexual minority identities by state authorities and the medical and academic establishments.

In this section we describe the state of mental health services for the LGBTQ community in Iran, and the mental health resources available to community members. This analysis is based upon surveys conducted of LGBTQ people in Iran, as well as focus groups, interviews and desk research.

As in the case of sexual health, we provide some general context about mental health services in Iran before turning to challenges specific to the LGBTQ community. We then describe the specific gaps in LGBTQ service provision that must be addressed to resolve the community's mental health crisis.

3.2.1 ▲ THE STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Even among the general population, studies have demonstrated that a considerable proportion of Iranian citizens endure some degree of mental illness. One 2017 study suggested that 23.4% of the population was living with mental illness, with rates in some provinces, including Tehran, Isfahan and Lorestan, exceeding 30%.[33] In addition, mental illness is still something of a taboo topic; one 2011 study suggested that 40% of mentally ill respondents in Tehran experienced high levels of stigma because of their illness.[34] It is therefore important to remember that barriers already exist

32 For examples of studies on LGBTQ mental health in Europe and North America, see: Russell, S. T., & Fish, J. N., (2016), 'Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Youth', *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology 12*, pp. 465–487, available at: http://bit.ly/2Kn0Ino
Mustanski, B. S., Garofalo, R., & Emerson, E. M., (2010), 'Mental Health Disorders, Psychological Distress, and Suicidality in a Diverse Sample of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youths', *American Journal of Public Health 100.12*, pp. 2426–2432, available at: http://bit.ly/2rcqKAX

33 Noorbala AA, Bagheri Yazdi SA, Faghihzadeh S, Kamali K, Faghihzadeh E, Hajebi A, Akhondzadeh S, Esalatmanesh S, Bagheri Yazdi HS, Abbasinejad M, Asadi A. (2017), 'Trends of mental health status in Iranian population aged 15 and above between 1999 and 2015', *Arch Iran Med* 20.11 Suppl. 1, S2 – S6.

34 Ghanean H, Nojomi M, Jacobsson L., (2011), "Internalized stigma of mental illness in Tehran, Iran", Stigma Research Action 1.1, pp. 11–7

for Iranian citizens seeking mental health support, even barring the sense of embarrassment, shame and fear that so often colours the LGBTQ experience of using such services. Such feelings are only intensified when minority sexual and gender identities are classed by health professionals as psychiatric disorders.

One of our focus group respondents spoke about this lack of public awareness and understanding of mental health in Iran, stating that major efforts were needed to shift perceptions:

"When it comes to Iranian society, when we talk about mental health there's a huge gap. People don't even understand what we are talking about. "Health is health" they say, and I believe even a person who is suffering from some sort of mental difficulties doesn't accept it themselves. It's not easy to face up to [these challenges]."

"Shirin", bisexual woman, Canada

Against this backdrop of a wider mental health crisis, overstretched services and societal stigma around mental illness, the prospect of addressing the specific mental health needs of Iran's LGBTQ community is a daunting one. Before thinking about possible solutions, let's take a moment to map out some of the unique problems faced by the LGBTQ community, relating both to mental illness and to access to crucial support services.

3.2 ▲ LGBTQ ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND RESOURCES

At the same time as Iran criminalises sexual minorities, it medicalises them. As a consequence, LGBTQ people in Iran are at once 'confused' and immoral, victims and criminals, worthy of both pity and scorn. According to authorities, minority sexual orientations and gender identities are considered 'deviations' from healthy heterosexual and cisgender norms – deviations that can be corrected through medical or psychological treatments. This makes it very challenging for LGBTQ people to access appropriate mental health support services or Persian-language resources.

"Elina", a lesbian living in Iran, clearly encapsulated these fears, stating that she only knew of a tiny handful of mental health professionals who react in a helpful manner to LGBTQ clients:

"There are no support services for homosexuals. I've heard of two or three [mental health professionals] who react well [to LGBTQ clients]. This is very worrying, and there's always a fear of being

exposed, or of them wanting to cure you. Our psychotherapists are sick... the ones on Instagram are also full of stereotypes [about LGBTQ people]. That's why [an online mental health support initiative] is so important."

"Elina", lesbian, Iran

As well as expressing fears about poor treatment in the event that they engaged with support services, many respondents highlighted problems around a lack of mental health awareness in Iran's LGBTQ community.

One respondent described how the lack of a standardised vocabulary around mental health in Iran made it particularly difficult to search for materials:

"There are absolutely no resources. There are concepts that aren't even translated into Persian, and this makes it even harder for people to search. I really think we need a Persian-speaking psychotherapist with a good understanding of these concepts who is available online to address people's issues – to hold a sort of Q&A."

"Amin", bisexual man, USA

The respondent went on to describe how, all too often, LGBTQ people suffering from mental illness do not even recognise that they need support, often due to social isolation and hesitance to use existing health services:

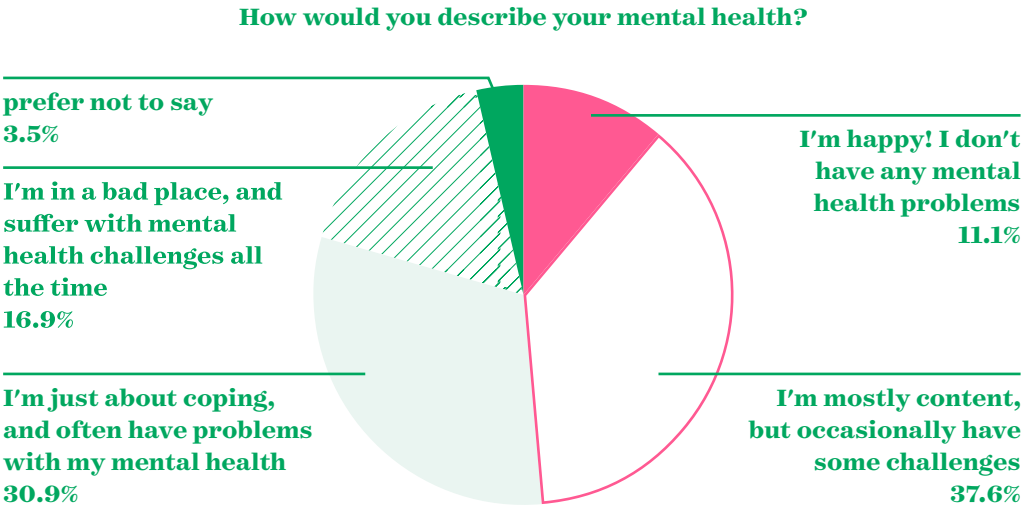


Figure 3.2.2a
Surveys showed widespread experiences with poor mental health in the community

Have you ever spoken with a mental health professional about your sexual orientation or gender identity?

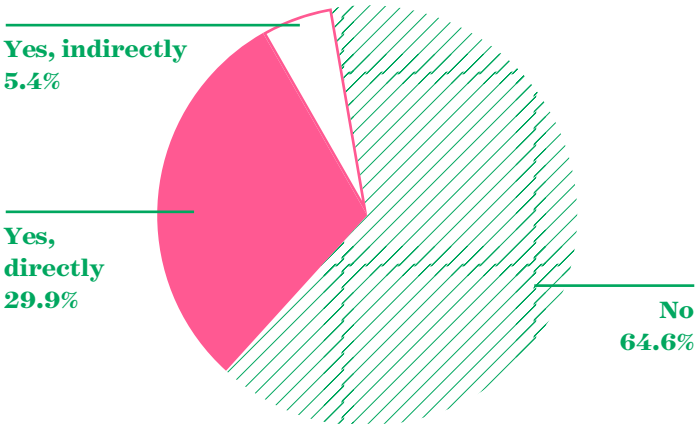


Figure 3.2.2b

Few LGBTQ people had shared their orientation or identity with professionals

"Many depressive individuals do not even know themselves that they are depressive, and so it's important to make these resources available to everyone. Especially for people like us, who live alone and do not have family around, and we might not go to see the physician or talk to therapists... I think it's very important."

"Amin", bisexual man, USA

These concerns were echoed in our focus group of gay men in Turkey. One respondent even suggested that the lack of access to Persian-language mental health support services for refugees makes it more difficult to obtain help than in Iran:

How did mental health professionals react to patient' disclosure of their sexual orientation/gender identity?

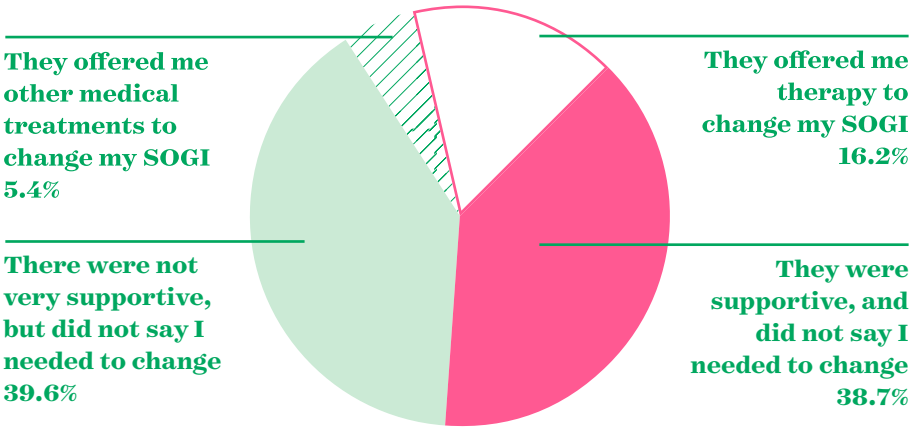


Figure 3.2.2c

When people did disclose information, only around two-fifths of respondents received appropriate support

Do Iranian LGBTQ people know where to go to find online mental health resources?

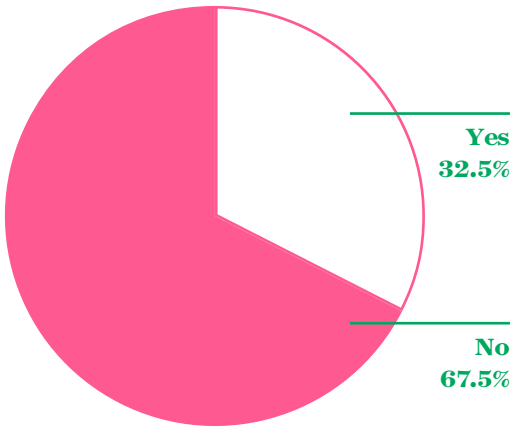


Figure 3.2.2d
A majority of LGBTQ people did not know where to go to find mental health resources

Hossein: *There are very, very few [online] resources on mental health.*

Hamid: *But Iranian gays don't think they need to seek help when it comes to mental health! I think here in Turkey at least 80 percent of Iranian gay men need urgent mental health [support] but they don't know it... in Iran the situation was better. I used to visit a psychotherapist who knew I was gay and she helped me a lot.*
Hamid & Hossein, gay male focus group, Turkey

Members of the trans community also expressed concerns that an overemphasis on resources about gender reassignment had left a void in discussions around the mental health crisis:

"I think that [as trans people] our mental health is not taken seriously at all. Unfortunately there is not enough information on this [issue], and everyone [only] knows about gender reassignment surgeries... they do not take gender identity seriously."
"Roya", transgender woman, Iran

The lack of mental health resources available to Iranian LGBTQ people, the underdevelopment of mental health discourse in Iran and nervousness around accessing existing support services are all significant challenges for the community in Iran. Overcoming these challenges will require significant investment and support from the international community and a great deal of grassroots community action on the ground, especially in the light of continued government inaction.

INTERVIEW
"REZA"
PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Small Media interviewed "Reza"—an Iran-based psychotherapist—to better understand some of the issues around mental health support provision and access to resources in Iran.
Reza collaborates with a Persian-language LGBTQ-focused radio station to produce mental health resources for the community in Iran. He is a practicing psychotherapist, and has provided support to LGBTQ clients in his work.

Hi Reza. Could you talk a little bit about the work you undertake to support LGBTQ mental health?

I have a weekly psychological consultation program on [the LGBTQ radio station] where I try to talk about different psychological subjects in simple language, as well as answering common listeners' questions which could be useful for other people.

Many LGBTQ people—and even some non-LGBTQ individuals—get in touch with us using our Telegram account. Sometimes when I feel the person behind the chat is in an emergency situation—if I feel there's a risk they'll commit suicide, or hurt themselves—then I'll offer them a voice call.

We can't offer full treatment by chat, and so when I feel the person needs some serious psychological support, I give them some advice and encourage them to begin treatment with local professionals.

Many listeners' questions are about their sexuality, issues around rejection from family and society, relationship difficulties, and cheating... all of which can typically be answered online.

What kinds of challenges do your LGBTQ clients talk about most frequently?

It's not easy to sort through the questions we receive. Some messages are from young people who face varieties of depression and disappointment in their lives – they complain about facing problems with their parents, or rejection for being LGBTQ. They are not happy to hide or deny their real identities on account of the pressures from society and the government's stance on LGBTQ people.

We have also received many questions from LGBTQ people who need help to understand and accept themselves as they are – lots of questions are about sexual identity and sexual orientation and some of them are looking for treatments to become— as they say—'normal'!

Then we get loads of messages from homosexual and bisexual people who have been forced to get married by their families. Living independently before marriage is not at all easy in Iran – beside the financial difficulties, parents always trying to control their children's lives, even if they're over the age of 50! Marriage is the only way for some guys to get independence. Girls have even more problems living alone because of cultural and religious attitudes, and for both genders these problems are even bigger in small towns and villages.

We've also been receiving questions about relationship problems and difficulties with partners.

Are you aware of any effective online Persian-language mental health resources? Who are these targeted at?

Actually we have good online resources in Persian, but many of them are restricted inside the country because of the government's internet filtering policies. The other problem is that we have a lot of non-scientific (mostly religious) junk websites that publish false and homophobic content promoted by the government. It's not easy for ordinary internet users to find correct and trustworthy information.

What is your assessment of the level of understanding of LGBTQ issues amongst mental health professionals in Iran? Are they generally capable of working with LGBTQ clients in a constructive and supportive manner?

It's not easy to say, because I'm part of this group and I know some professionals who are very well qualified in their job.

But let me share my own experiences with a university professor in psychology who was teaching Family and Group Therapy. He told me that he can't accept homosexuality in any way, and that if he had a gay patient he would 'throw the dirty pig out of his clinic'.

Me and other students asked him about his opinion of the APA (American Psychiatric Association) references about homosexuality, and he said that he believed DSM (the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and APA are being controlled and guided by Zionism and Israel, and that the scientific references and research about homosexuality just got accepted by the APA because of diplomatic and political forces.

In their messages, our audience has also reported that some mental health professionals have demonstrated judgmental and impolite unprofessional behavior, and have suggested medication, hormone therapy and psychotherapy to change LGBT people's sexual identity and/or orientation. Do professionals have access to specific materials about treating LGBTQ patients? How about ethics codes to regulate their treatment of LGBTQ clients?

Curious professionals can search for and read new research (they just need to pass the internet filtering)! But I haven't seen any publications such as books or journals that directly refer to LGBT topics.

The translated study books and references that get published are censored – I saw myself that in the original general psychology and developmental psychology books that students use in our universities, the chapters on sexuality and homosexuality had vanished!

Everything can be political in my country, and politics is connected to religion here. So, as Islam is not accepting of homosexuality, and the law suggests punishment for homosexual behavior (and the death penalty for gay men), it could be considered a 'red line' for teachers to speak freely about this subject, and they might be scared of the consequences of teaching against the government's beliefs.

What's your assessment of online mental health support services? Can they provide an effective alternative to face-to-face therapy and support?

The answer is NO! Online therapy is not effective as a treatment, but it can support and motivate patients to follow [other] treatment.

It depends on the patient's problems, but I don't think that online chat can be used to provide alternative treatment, because when we're in the same room with a patient face-to-face we can determine their body language, identify avoidance, anxiety, obsession, anger... and that helps us to diagnose their problems correctly, and more easily.

Online services can be very helpful, and are life savers in some situations. My fellow Iranians are so conservative and shy about seeking professional help when it comes to sex-related issues, and gay people are afraid of getting known or arrested if they go to a clinic – especially if they're living in small towns. That's why they prefer to ask sexuality-related health and mental health questions virtually to avoid the risk of being judged, or running into other issues.

But there are differences between treatment and consulting – I can help my online patients to learn more about their sexuality, for instance, but I can't start them on treatment for OCD!

What kind of support do Iranian mental health professionals need to provide a better quality of care to their LGBTQ clients, and what practical actions could be taken to improve care?

Publishing up-to-date articles in Persian about LGBT topics in scientific journals or non-LGBT websites could be helpful, as people may have prejudices against LGBT-focused sources. Today we are faced with new LGBT problems such as having children, marriage, divorce and more—but we are still fighting to make people understand that being LGBT is normal!

The international academic and scientific centres which have academic relations with Iran might force the Psychology and Counseling Organisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other Iranian academies to publish their genuine professional points of view about homosexuality, bisexuality, and other topics.

I put emphasis on homosexual and bisexual issues because transgender people obtained a fatwa to be able to change their sex. It doesn't mean they don't face problems here, but they have supporting NGOs and are not faced with legal threats from the regime.

Psychoanalysts and psychologists are not efficient enough in Iran, but they are part of society, and we can change their points of view and motivate them to search for more information about the subject through movies, news and other types of Persian-language media. I think it could be a way to update them, as well as other people.

Many of these observations from focus groups and interviews were repeated in our survey of 314 LGBTQ community members, examining their access to health resources on- and offline.

Our survey showed that despite 47.8% of participants experiencing frequent bouts of mental illness, only 35.3% had spoken about their sexual orientation or gender identity with a mental health professional.

Of those people who disclosed this information, one fifth (21.6%) were subsequently offered therapy or medical treatments to change their orientation or gender identity. A further two-fifths of respondents (39.6%) were not offered treatment, but described their therapists as being otherwise unsupportive.

Exacerbating the fact that a minority of interactions with mental health professionals were positive, there are few other avenues through which Iranian LGBTQ people can access support services. Our survey showed that over two-thirds (67.5%) of the community members surveyed did not know how to access online mental health resources. As such, there is an urgent need for international LGBTQ organisations, community groups and health providers to work together to develop and disseminate mental health resources, and to engage in far-reaching awareness-raising campaigns around mental health.

To discuss some of these thorny issues further we spoke to "Reza", an Iran-based psychotherapist who has undertaken a range of work with LGBTQ clients and support organisations.

3.2.3 ▲ ETHICAL DILEMMAS: SECURING OFFICIAL RECOGNITION FOR SEXUAL MINORITIES

At the root of many of the the existing challenges relating to LGBTQ mental health provision is the Ethics Code of Iran's mental health professional body, the Psychology and Counseling Organisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (PCOIRI). This body is responsible for setting guidelines and regulating the practices of mental health professionals across Iran.

The current version of the PCOIRI's Ethics Code fails to mention the existence of sexual minorities, or define codes and principles for respecting LGBTQ people's rights and protecting them from harm while they engage with mental health support services. A paper from 2014 highlights these challenges, and notes that:

"As the general codes and principles for respecting people's rights and protecting them from harm are not adequately defined in the Ethics Code of the PCOIRI, there is clearly potential for confusion and professional malpractice, especially toward sexual minorities."[35]

This paper also refers to comparable ethical guidelines drawn up in the Muslim-majority states of Turkey and Malaysia as models, in that they both specify the need for mental health professionals not to discriminate against clients on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The authors recommend that in the case of Iran:

"When handling LGBT clients, Iranian psychologists and counselors would benefit from clear and specific guidelines that act not only as a point of reference but also as guiding information to ensure their ethical non-discriminatory practice with regard to assessments, interventions,identity, relationships, diversity, education, training, and research".[36]

This guidance is coherent with the suggestions made by Reza above, who highlighted the need for Iranian psychiatric bodies to be offered clear evidence that sexual minorities should not be classified as mentally ill:

"Publishing up-to-date articles in Persian about LGBT topics in scientific journals or non-LGBT websites could be helpful, as people may have prejudices against LGBT-focused sources."
"Reza", Iran-based psychotherapist

In addition to providing Iranian mental health professionals with appropriate resources, "Reza" noted that international psychiatric organisations and networks should play a role in pressuring Iranian organisations such as the PCOIRI to justify their existing positions on recognising homosexuality and bisexuality, and encourage them to change:

"The international academic and scientific centers which have academic relations with Iran might force the Psychology and Counseling Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other

35 Yadegarfard, Mohammadrasool, Fatemeh Bahramabadian, (2014), "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in the Ethics Code of the Psychology and Counseling Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran (PCOIRI)", Ethics & Behaviour 24.5, p. 323

36 Ibid p. 324

Iranian academies to publish their genuine professional points of view about homosexuality, bisexuality, and other topics."
"Reza", Iran-based psychotherapist

Although seeking state recognition for LGBTQ people might be an unattainable ambition at the present time, if activists and international allies were to lobby aggressively for the recognition of sexual minorities by the PCOIRI then it could result in practical and meaningful benefits for LGBTQ people. Such benefits might include putting an end to conversion therapies, combatting the conflation of sexual and gender identities, and the development of better practices and resources to support LGBTQ mental health.

3.2.4 ▲ RECOMMENDATIONS: MENTAL HEALTH

Tackling the mental health crisis afflicting Iran's LGBTQ community should be considered an urgent priority for local and diaspora-based LGBTQ activists, and international organisations working to support the community. 88.8% of community members polled stated that they suffered with some degree of mental illness, while support services remain essentially non-existent, barring a small number of online initiatives.

Just under two thirds of respondents have never been able to speak with a mental health professional about their sexual orientation or gender identity, and another two thirds have no idea where to go to access mental health resources online. It is clear that Iranian LGBTQ people require more mental health resources, and they need access to community-tailored mental health support and guidance.

We have identified some suggestions for potential avenues of support to be provided to the community through digital media development initiatives, in addition to some general recommendations about how to support LGBTQ mental health:

▲ LGBTQ content producers should prioritise the development of mental health resources and its dissemination in existing community spaces.

The fact that such a large segment of the LGBTQ people polled do not know where they can find appropriate mental health resources online signifies that there is an urgent need to develop resources, and to make them truly accessible to the community. A number of useful resources were highlighted by some interviewees and focus group participants, but our survey data suggests that these are not on the radar of large segments of the community.

In order to make new mental health resources accessible and useful for LGBTQ people, they should be deployed in spaces where the community already congregates. Our data suggests that for gay and bisexual men, for instance, apps such as Hornet and Grindr might play a major role in distributing mental health information. For trans people, official trans NGOs and support networks should also play a significant role in the provision of mental health resources.

Lesbian and bisexual women remain the hardest group to reach, with comparatively limited app usage and fewer dedicated online spaces than other communities. For these groups, existing online content hubs should play a leading role in running awareness-raising campaigns and resource provision.

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations and local organisations should work together to develop resources and training materials to support Iranian mental health professionals to better treat their LGBTQ clients.**

As a result of the lack of official recognition of non-heterosexual sexual orientations by the PCOIRI and the higher education system, many Iranian mental health professionals lack the training to support LGBTQ clients effectively, and in some cases may not have any sound understanding of concepts such as homosexuality or bisexuality.

It is crucial that LGBTQ organisations work with experts to develop and translate substantive documentation into Persian to support Iranian psychotherapists and other mental health professionals to remain informed about LGBTQ mental health.

▲ **International donors and LGBTQ organisations should work with local LGBTQ groups to develop online services that can connect Iranian LGBTQ people to properly trained and sympathetic mental health professionals in Iran and the diaspora.**

A small number of services have appeared in the past couple of years to connect LGBTQ people to mental health professionals via online platforms such as Telegram. Although these services offer no substitute for in-person consultations with trained psychotherapists, they can prove invaluable in providing emergency support to LGBTQ people in crisis situations.

International organisations should continue to invest in and support such initiatives seeking to provide remote mental health support

services to LGBTQ people in Iran, and other projects working to connect community members to effective and appropriate mental health professionals based inside Iran.

▲ Internationally-recognised academic and psychiatric institutions and LGBTQ advocacy organisations should lobby Iranian mental health professionals and professional bodies to grant recognition to sexual minorities, in line with international standards.

Engagement with groups such as the PCOIRI offers a potentially rewarding opportunity to change the perception and classification of homosexuality and bisexuality within the medical profession. Campaigns targeting organisations such as the PCOIRI, and outreach programmes from international psychiatric organisations, might prove fruitful in helping to align Iran's classification of sexual minorities with globally-recognised standards, and thereby bring about material improvements in treatment for LGBTQ clients.

3.3
Digital Security

We've identified some of the biggest challenges that exist with regard to safeguarding LGBTQ people's sexual and mental health, and have explored in depth the opportunities for connection and community development that technology affords. But so far we have not addressed perhaps the most immediate threat facing Iranian sexual and gender minorities: the maintenance of individuals' security in the face of surveillance, online harassment, and entrapment.

In this section we describe the threats perceived by the community, the efforts they are undertaking to protect themselves, and the blind spots in digital security awareness that need to be addressed by LGBTQ content providers in Iran and international allies. Our analysis is based on a digital security survey distributed to 727 LGBTQ participants between 6 February and 1 March 2018, as well as focus groups, interviews, and our network analysis of LGBTQ activities on Instagram.

Although the Rouhani government itself is less aggressive in its pursuit of LGBTQ citizens than Ahmadinejad's administration, an array of other actors—whether from the IRGC, Cyber Police, Intelligence Ministry or independent groups—continue to harass and threaten LGBTQ people online. The community must remain vigilant against such threats, and be supported by content

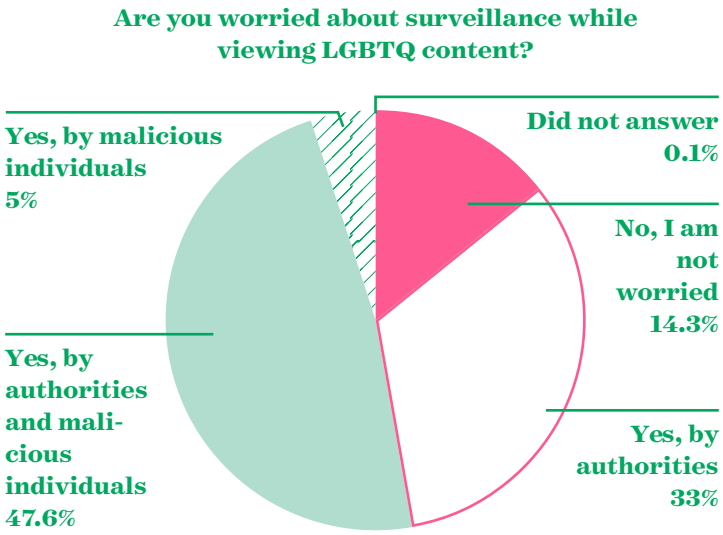


Figure 3.3.1a

Only a tiny minority of respondents expressed no concern about surveillance

producers in Iran and the international community to develop their understanding and implementation of digital security and online safety strategies.

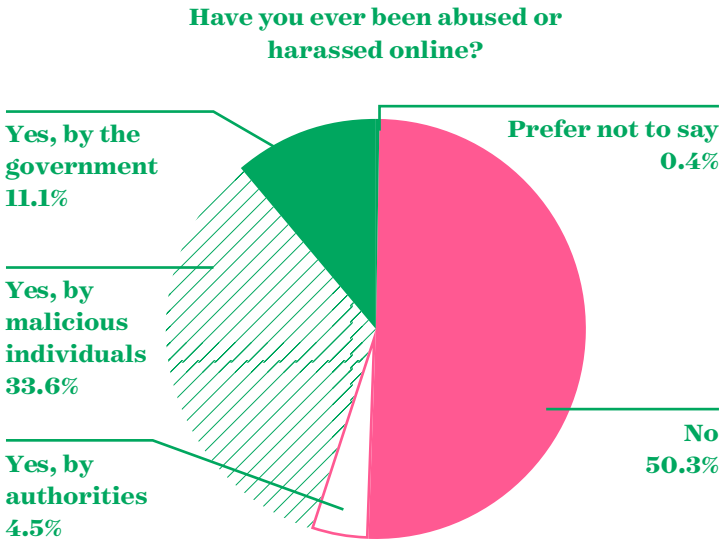
3.3.1 ▲ THE VOYEUR STATE: LGBTQ PERCEPTIONS OF RISK ONLINE

According to our survey, the risk mostly widely perceived by the LGBTQ community is of surveillance—both by the state and malicious individuals. A total of 80.8% of respondents expressed concerns around being surveilled by the state while accessing LGBTQ-themed content, with a total of 37.6% of respondents expressing fears about being monitored by malicious individuals not affiliated with the state.

Another threat that was much-discussed in our 2013 report is that of online entrapment. The issue is one that creates a great deal of paranoia and uncertainty among the community throughout its online engagements.

"Elina", a lesbian based in Iran, spoke of how she becomes riddled with anxiety whenever she is set to meet someone she has chatted with online in the real world, and digitally 'vets' her potential partners intensely:

"Do I feel safe on the Internet? Not at all. If [someone] asks me on a date I'll say no and deny everything [about my sexuality], especially if they're from my city. I'm afraid they might be someone from the government who presents themselves as LGBT to identify us.



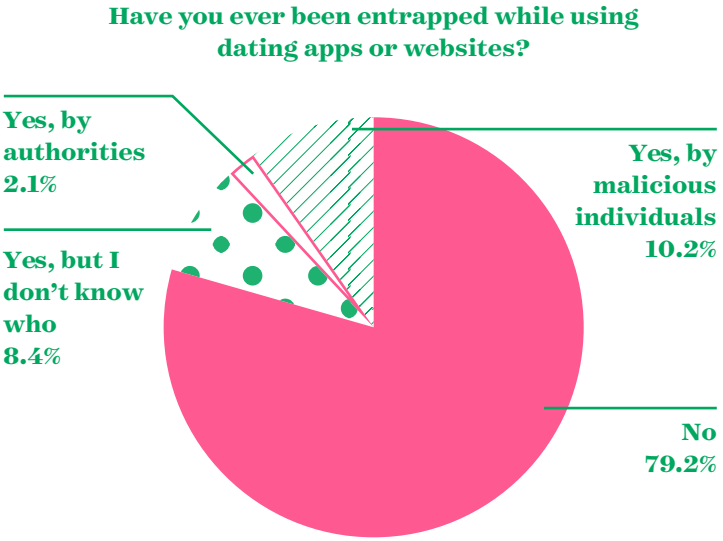


Figure 3.3.1b

Around a fifth of respondents reported falling victim to online entrapment

Figure 3.3.1c

Half of respondents reported experiencing harassment online.

"I usually speak very generally while I get to know them. I observe my followers and check their comments as much as I can, and look to see what they're like, and that they don't follow any religious people at all, nor other people from my city. I haven't come out on my own page, and my content is sort of ambiguous."

"Elina", lesbian, Iran

Although a number of interviewees in our previous report had heard anecdotal reports of entrapment, none had experienced the threat themselves. However, among our survey of 727 LGBTQ people, 20.8% of respondents said they had experienced entrapment—10.2% from malicious individuals, 2.1% from authorities, and 8.4% from unknown sources.

As noted in Chapter 1.3.2, one of our gay male focus group participants "Hossein" also shared evidence of entrapment from 2016, being sent an SMS message from the 'Notification Office of IRGC Intelligence' soon after speaking with an individual claiming to work for the Iranian Cyber Police:

*"I remember once I have received a message from a user who claimed to be working for the Cyber Police. I greeted him very normally and thanked him for all of his efforts *laughs*. [Later] I received a text message on my mobile phone from the Revolutionary Guard intelligence protection office which asked me not to leave my city, as there was a court case being lodged against me for the act of sodomy. It was so scary, and that's why I fled from Iran."*

"Hossein", gay man, Turkey

The message to "Hossein" read:

Greetings. Be aware that you are forbidden by law from leaving the province of [redacted] until such a time as a verdict has been reached on your charge of sodomy. Notification Office of IRGC Intelligence.

The mixed messages here are interesting; although "Hossein" notes an interaction with a person claiming to be from the Iranian Cyber Police, the threatening message he receives claims to originate from IRGC Intelligence. Although this *could* suggest information-sharing about LGBTQ people across state-aligned bodies, it could just as easily be a marker of a shoddy and thoughtless attempt at

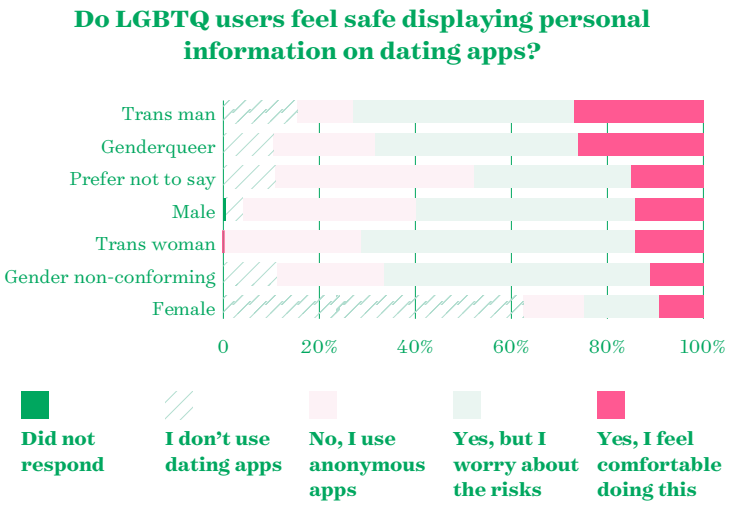


Figure 3.3.2a
Although few users feel comfortable sharing personal information on dating apps, many choose to take the risk anyway

anti-LGBTQ harassment by an independent actor. Further research to fully document, and identify the sources of entrapment and harassment of LGBTQ people online would be incredibly valuable to inform digital security practices, and to hold authorities to account.

Online harassment and anti-LGBTQ hate speech is also widespread online, with 49.7% of respondents having encountered harassment by either state-aligned actors or other malicious individuals. As noted in Chapter 2.2.2, LGBTQ content producers on public social media platforms such as Instagram are frequently subject to harassment and abuse.

Such abuse is regrettably difficult to avoid—especially for highly influential accounts posting regularly about LGBTQ topics. Nonetheless, social media platforms must remain alert to the threat posed by troll accounts, and should responsibly monitor and respond to harassment reports submitted by Iranian users. With this comes the requirement to substantially develop their capacities to process and respond to Persian-language abuse reports.

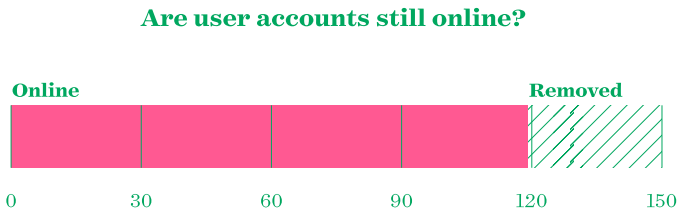
3.3.2 ▲ BARING ALL: SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, DATING APPS, AND ONLINE SAFETY

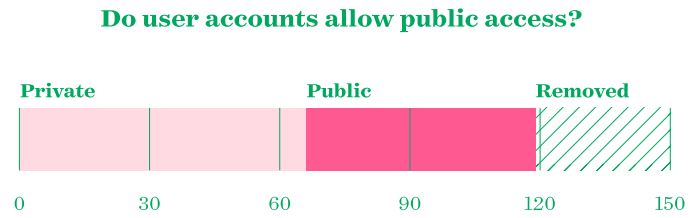
Many of the leading risks faced by LGBTQ people online do not necessarily stem from sophisticated state surveillance operations, or crack teams of hackers and extortionists. Frequently, LGBTQ people looking to make connections engage in risky activities that can very easily expose them to entrapment and blackmail.

Among our sample of 727 LGBTQ respondents to our digital security survey, we found a conflicted relationship between apps and their users. Except for for cisgender women and users who did not disclose their gender identity, more than half of all users in other demographic groups stated that they shared personal information on dating apps, with more than half of these users recognising that they knew this behaviour carried risk.

The high proportion of LBQ women who do not use dating apps is very striking; the recognition of risks around entrapment and online harassment, as well as the perceived lack of availability of dating apps for women are likely influential factors here.

The risks around online entrapment on dating apps such as Hornet and Grindr have been documented comprehensively by Article 19, whose 2018 report documented some of the ways that malicious state- and non-state-affiliated actors have used apps to entrap,





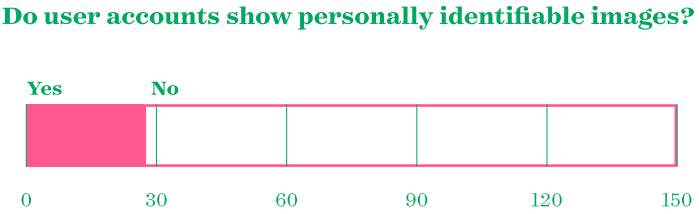


Figure 3.3.2b

A majority of user accounts remained online over a month after commenting

Figure 3.3.2c

Around half of the accounts that remained active had enabled privacy settings

Figure 3.3.2d

A vast majority of sampled users refrained from showing identifiable images

humiliate and abuse LGBTQ people, as well as to collect evidence against individuals when cases are brought to prosecution.[37] This research outlined an array of recommendations to apps relation to geolocation services, user authentication practices, and emergency reporting systems, which we endorse fully.

We would note that it is also important to recognise the important role that is being played by social media platforms such as Instagram as spaces for LGBTQ connection. Owing to the filtering and perceived surveillance of traditional dating platforms, some users perceive alternative spaces such as Instagram and Telegram as safe spaces to meet other LGBTQ people.

37 Article 19, (2018), 'Apps, arrests and abuse in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran', available at: http://bit.ly/2I4QlGl

SNAPSHOT // LGBTQ MEETING SPACES

We asked 806 LGBTQ survey respondents where they most frequently met and connected with other LGBTQ Iranians. Dating apps were the most popular method by some distance, with 48.3% of users using them to connect with LGBTQ people either very often or quite often. After dating apps, Telegram (33%) and Instagram (22.2%) acted as crucial congregation spaces for the community.

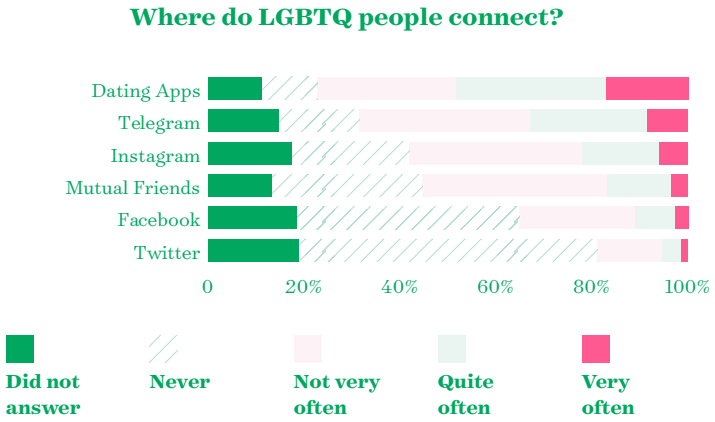


Figure 3.3.2e
Dating apps, Telegram and Instagram are the online spaces in which LGBTQ people connect most frequently

As we noted in Chapter 2.2, many Instagram accounts are seemingly established for the sole purpose of facilitating meetups between gay and bisexual men, with many catering to specific cities or provinces. The 'cruising' posts published by these accounts typically contain softcore pornography, and their comments sections are a hive of activity with users exchanging their age, location, and a host of personal details.

Many of the accounts commenting on these pages employ basic but effective strategies for minimising risks of surveillance and entrapment: they set their accounts as 'private', they do not share personal photos as profile images, and in some cases these accounts are deleted at a later date in order to remove all traces of a user's activities.[38]

38 Although it is possible that some of these accounts were automated bots, the content of the comments posted by the deleted accounts we identified did not generally differ from that of other users. These accounts shared information about their age, sexual preferences, and city of origin.

We analysed the profiles of 150 users who commented on one of these Instagram posts between 21-28 February 2018, taking note of the security precautions they took; specifically whether their account was private or publicly viewable, whether they had personally identifiable images in their profile image or public account, and whether they had 'burned' or closed their account by April 14 2018.

▲ **20.7% of users operated burner accounts which have since been deleted.**
▲ **44% of users enabled privacy settings on their accounts.**
▲ **18% of users display accessible personally identifiable images**

It is encouraging that a majority of users either restrict public access to their accounts, or operate disposable burner accounts when using these 'cruising' spaces on Instagram. Similarly, we are encouraged that less than one fifth of these users shared personally identifiable images on their public profiles, although we recommend that more awareness-raising work be undertaken to ensure that these users are fully aware of the risks this may entail.

This can be achieved by incorporating Instagram-focused digital security and online safety guidance into all security materials targeting the LGBTQ community in Iran; with more than one in five LGBTQ people using the platform to connect with other LGBTQ people either 'very often' or 'often', it constitutes a crucially important community space

The dynamics of user activities on Telegram are also very important to consider when developing new digital security resources. Our interviewees and focus group participants spoke about some of the security measures they currently take to protect themselves on the messaging platform. "Roya", a transgender woman described some of the security measures employed in her groups, which again are 'burned' after a period of time:

"I'm a member of a closed group on Telegram, where we have more than 200 people and four admins who check for security issues. Even so, we change the channel from time to time."
"Roya", transgender woman, Iran

The deletion of Telegram channels can be an effective method for mitigating risks of surveillance. For example, if one member of a 200 member group is arrested, and authorities access the user's Telegram app, then all of the group's messages could be saved, and feasibly used against members. Deleting groups wipes all messages, thereby eliminating this risk.

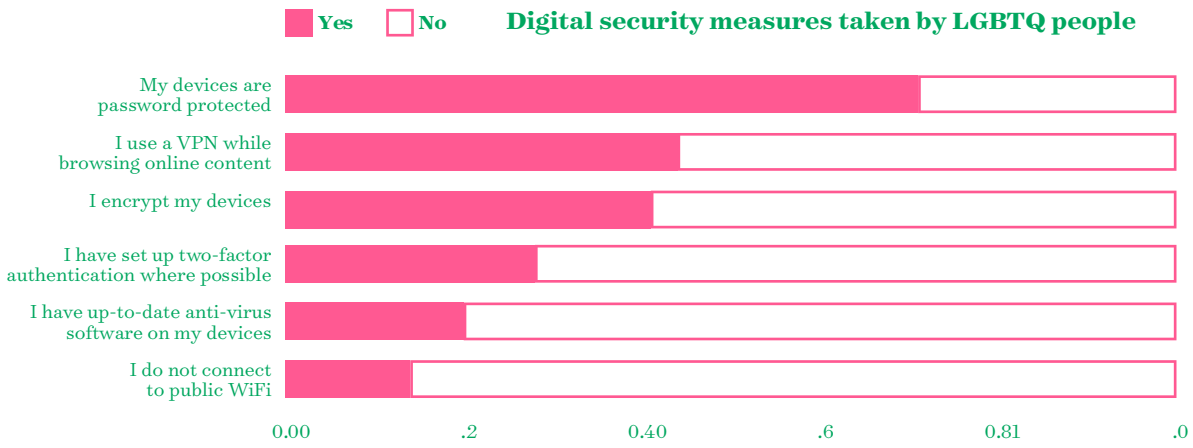


Figure 3.3.3a

Many digital security practices are still not implemented by LGBTQ users

Other considerations with regard to communications include the choice of specific messaging apps, particularly for group chats. Apps that are based on phone numbers pose huge security risks, given that this personally identifiable information can easily be used against individuals—WhatsApp and Signal are both imperfect for group conversations in this sense. Email-based apps like Wire and Confide are safer alternatives, although our research shows that usage remains low within the community—only 1.1% of users and 0.4% use these apps, respectively.

With Telegram's dominance in the Iranian messaging app market, it is likely that users will continue to make use of its group chat features over its rivals. Given this reality, digital security resources should prioritise practical tips and guidance to minimise the risks of using popular platforms such as Telegram.

3.3.3 ▲ ALWAYS USE PROTECTION: DIGITAL SECURITY AND THREAT MITIGATION

As well as ensuring community caution about the sharing of personal information online, it is crucial for community allies to take an active role in promoting rigorous digital security practices among vulnerable LGBTQ users. We asked our survey of 727 LGBTQ individuals about the kinds of digital security measures they take to protect themselves from online harm.

Disappointingly, apart from the use of basic password protection on users' personal devices, less than half of our respondents reported that they practiced the other digital security measures specified. In particular, the lack of two-factor authentication on apps, low levels of VPN usage, and high rates of connection to public WiFi

constitute very real threats to LGBTQ users, exposing them to surveillance and hacking by malicious actors.

Our interviewees came equipped with very different levels of digital security awareness. At the high end of the scale is "Shokoufeh", a transgender lesbian living in Iran, who described her comprehensive security protocols to us:

"I use VPNs and two other pieces of software which clean up any remaining traces, and C-Cleaner to delete documents and files, and Advanced Systemcare to delete passwords."
"Shokoufeh", transgender lesbian, Iran

Based on our survey sample however, we can assume that Ana is not representative of the wider community. "Farhad", a transgender man, is perhaps more typical of the community at large and its relatively basic digital security skills, describing how a lack of information has plunged him into a mindset of perpetual self-censorship:

"We don't publish any pictures [online]. We do not write anything. We have very little information about Internet security [so] we have nothing on the laptop. As we cannot stop other people from acting dangerously on the Internet, we decided to censor ourselves instead."
"Farhad", transgender man, Iran

International allies developing digital security resources must remain conscious of the limited digital security capacities of large sections of the LGBTQ community, and should continue to develop resources that contextualise digital security risks within a user's everyday experiences.

3.3.4 ▲ RECOMMENDATIONS: DIGITAL SECURITY

This chapter has demonstrated that LGBTQ people in Iran continue to perceive a wide array of digital security threats from both the state, and malicious actors seeking to harass and exploit the community. It's also shown that, despite an awareness of these risks, many individuals are either reluctant to mitigate them, or else do not know how to do so.

With these challenges in mind, we have developed a series of recommendations for organisations seeking to support rigorous digital security practices among at-risk LGBTQ populations inside Iran:

▲ **Digital rights organisations, technology companies and existing community hubs should take a leading role in better supporting LGBTQ populations to use effective and proven privacy tools to counter the threat of online surveillance.**

LGBTQ people perceive no greater threat than online surveillance. That only 14.3% of our survey respondents stated they were unafraid of online surveillance is striking, and highlights an urgent need for community members to be supported to use effective and proven privacy tools to protect themselves.

International privacy and digital rights organisations should seek partnerships and collaborations with popular dating apps to advertise reliable privacy tools, and push them to integrate privacy tools into the apps themselves.

Similarly, existing community hubs and key Telegram and Instagram channels should be supported to produce and publish guidance on the use of privacy tools, contextualising their importance for LGBTQ people.

▲ **Digital rights organisations, technology companies and community groups should develop localised and comprehensive resources to inform LGBTQ people about information sharing and online safety, with a focus on dating apps, Instagram and Telegram.**

Online safety is not simply brought about by security tools, but is maintained by responsible and well-informed management of one's online persona. Resources related to online safety and privacy should be produced, outlining appropriate precautions to take on dating apps, as well as Telegram and Instagram. These resources should be distributed by the dating apps themselves, and in existing community spaces online. Content providers should design content based on the cultural specificities of both Iran and its LGBTQ community, and should not merely translate content from other languages into Persian.

Although we recognise that LGBTQ people do, and have always been forced to, engage in risky behaviours to find connection with other community members, it remains incumbent upon service providers, community organisations, and international rights groups to provide LGBTQ people with sufficient resources to allow them to make fully informed decisions about how to present themselves online.

▲ **Small Media endorses the recommendations made by Article 19 to dating apps requesting that they consider the security environments in which their users live, and that they develop or adapt features based on their users' specific needs.**

Our research shows that many LGBTQ populations feel anxiety about online surveillance and entrapment on dating apps. These findings are in line with Article 19's observations that users in contexts such as Iran have serious concerns around app features such as social media authentication, geolocation, and the limited availability of emergency mechanisms to report incidences of entrapment or harassment.

We stress the need for international LGBTQ organisations, digital rights organisations, and tech companies to work together to develop long-term strategies for supporting the online safety of LGBTQ people, and to adapt technologies where necessary to mitigate threats of surveillance and entrapment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the course of this report, we have shown how Iran's LGBTQ community has failed to be cowed by continued harassment and persecution on the part of the Iranian state. Although the darkest days of the Ahmadinejad have passed, the Rouhani administration clearly lacks both the inclination and the political will to recognise the rights of its LGBTQ citizens, and to guarantee their security and dignity.

LGBTQ citizens continue to have their rights to free expression violated, both online and offline. As well as facing the criminalisation of same-sex sexual activities under the Iranian Penal Code, LGBTQ people find themselves at threat of arrest and imprisonment even for sharing innocuous LGBTQ-related content on their social media channels owing to Iran's Computer Crimes Law.

In order to guarantee the human rights of its LGBTQ citizens, we call upon the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to implement the following measures as a matter of urgency:

▲ Repeal the Iranian Penal Code, and replace it with a new legal framework that upholds the rights of LGBTQ people as guaranteed under international law.
▲ The Computer Crimes Law should be repealed and replaced with a new digital rights bill guaranteeing citizens' rights to freedom of expression and privacy online.
▲ Iranian state officials and public figures must immediately desist from using language that demonises LGBTQ people, and which incites hatred and violence against them.

Although we offer these recommendations to the Iranian government, we realise that the likelihood of their implementation remains incredibly low. No politicians have so far demonstrated any desire to stand up for the rights of LGBTQ citizens, and we do not see any hope of this changing in the near future.

Given this reality, we recognise the immense value of international human rights organisations and LGBTQ rights advocates lobbying on behalf of Iranian LGBTQ citizens' rights at the international level. Above all we would emphasise the importance of thorough documentation work to track the continued violations of LGBTQ people's rights, and to hold accountable the institutions and individuals responsible. We commend organisations' excellent work on this front, and urge them to continue undertaking

documentation and advocacy work. To them, we offer the following suggestions:

▲ **Continue to develop and support tools and mechanisms that allow LGBTQ Iranians to securely report and document homophobic threats, violence, harassment and persecution—whether at the hands of the state, or individuals.**
▲ **Work with Iranian LGBTQ activists to develop campaigns actively challenging and debunking anti-LGBTQ rhetoric from state officials and organisations.**
▲ **Conduct further research to comprehensively document the origins of threats and harassment waged against LGBTQ people online, in order to provide rigorous resources to international human rights advocates.**

Although no progress has been made over the past decade with regard to the legal recognition of LGBTQ citizens' rights, our research suggests that social attitudes are slowly shifting in a positive direction. The high-profile support offered to LGBTQ people by megastars such as Googoosh and Behnoush Bakhtiari, and the gradual mainstreaming of community issues on social media platforms such as Instagram have created an atmosphere in which more and more Iranians feel comfortable coming out to their friends and loved ones.

This process of social change is slow, but Iranian public figures, media personalities, and diaspora satellite television networks can accelerate it by being outspoken public advocates for LGBTQ equality. Media outlets should continue to spark discussions about LGBTQ rights, and to give voice to the experiences of the community in Iran.

At the same time, international rights organisations should provide resources and support to LGBTQ media outlets and community spaces to help them develop content and online services addressing the needs of the community in Iran. To support the further growth of LGBTQ media in Iran we offer the following recommendations:

▲ **International organisations and community organisations should work with 'influencers' to help bring discussions about LGBTQ rights into the mainstream, whether they be movie stars, pop stars, TV personalities, or Instagram power users.**
▲ **Iranian LGBTQ organisations should produce culturally appropriate resources to support Iranian young people to make informed decisions about when and how to come out to friends and family, and to help them to do so as safely as possible.**
▲ **International LGBTQ organisations should invest resources**

in further developing existing community platforms, and helping them to create culturally-grounded and engaging multimedia content that addresses the community's challenges.

Besides ongoing questions around broader public acceptance and support, LGBTQ people face a number of very specific challenges around access to services that are not experienced by many heterosexual and cisgender citizens. Two of the greatest challenges relate to sexual health and mental health services.

As this report has show, the LGBTQ community and its allies in the international community have attempted to step up to meet some of the service delivery needs of LGBTQ people via online services. Although feedback around these services has been overwhelmingly positive, these services are strained and under-resourced, and require greater investment in order to scale up.

As well as practical services such as online counselling and sexual health consultations, the community remains active in producing online resources relating to sexual and mental health. Although much of this work is of high-quality, some interviewees expressed concern around sub-par translations of foreign-language resources, and a majority of survey respondents remained unaware of where to find such resources in the first place. More work is required to produce culturally grounded resources, and to disseminate them in places where the LGBTQ community already congregates online. In relation to the ongoing crisis in sexual health, we therefore offer the following recommendations:

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations and local community groups should work together to connect LGBTQ people with existing community-friendly sexual health services and support networks.**

▲ **International LGBTQ organisations should support the development of comprehensive and accessible online sexual health resources which are grounded in local cultural and social contexts.**

▲ **LGBTQ and sexual health advocacy organisations should develop a strategy to raise awareness around LGBTQ sexual health, with the participation of key influencers (whether these be media figures, celebrities, or liberal religious leaders).**

▲ **International and Iranian LGBTQ organisations should work with sexual health experts to develop online services to respond to community members' health enquiries, and direct them to appropriate health services where necessary.**

And with regard to the crisis in LGBTQ mental health, we propose the following:

▲ **LGBTQ content producers should prioritise the development of mental health resources, and their dissemination in existing community spaces.**
▲ **International LGBTQ organisations and local organisations should work together to develop resources and training materials to support Iranian mental health professionals to better treat their LGBTQ clients.**
▲ **International donors and LGBTQ organisations should work with local LGBTQ groups to develop online services that can connect Iranian LGBTQ people to properly trained and sympathetic mental health professionals in Iran and the diaspora.**
▲ **Internationally-recognised academic and psychiatric institutions and LGBTQ advocacy organisations should lobby Iranian mental health professionals and professional bodies to grant recognition to sexual minorities, in line with international standards.**

Although efforts to support the mental and sexual health of Iranian citizens must be considered an urgent priority, another crisis exists in the community's continued exposure to threats of surveillance, harassment and entrapment online.

The growing use of dating apps, and the proliferation of LGBTQ community spaces on social media platforms ranging from Instagram to Telegram to Facebook has resulted in a diverse array of threats that are specific to each platform. Previous research has demonstrated some of the risks that exist around certain functionalities of dating apps, but up until now limited attention has been paid to the challenges of limited digital security and online safety knowledge among Instagram users, for instance.

We call upon the community of digital security defenders and digital rights organisations to develop security resources targeting the full range of community spaces in which LGBTQ people congregate. Technology companies must of course also take a leading role in working with community organisations and digital rights groups to ensure that their platforms are safe environments for LGBTQ people, and that their users remain informed and aware of the risks of these online community hubs.

To support the digital security of the LGBTQ community in Iran, we offer the following suggestions:

▲ **Digital rights organisations, technology companies and existing community hubs should take a leading role in supporting LGBTQ populations to use effective and proven privacy tools to counter the threat of online surveillance, including the exploration of integrating such tools into dating apps.**

▲ **Digital rights organisations, technology companies and community groups should develop localised and comprehensive resources to inform LGBTQ people about information sharing and online safety, with a focus on dating apps, Instagram and Telegram.**

▲ **Small Media endorses the recommendations made in Article 19's February 2018 report, requesting that technology companies consider the security environments in which their users live, and that they develop and adapt app features based on their users' security needs.**

We recognise that the recommendations we have offered here are not exhaustive, and that the challenges identified in this report will require the investment of significant resources, time, and willpower to overcome. Nonetheless, we believe that these recommendations offer some important pathways towards supporting the development of Iran's LGBTQ community, nurturing its digital media ecology, and incubating some innovative forms of online service provision in the absence of straightforward community access to services in-country.

The challenges continuing to face Iran's LGBTQ population should not be understated. The judiciary and a host of state-affiliated bodies continue to harass and persecute sexual and gender minorities, and there is no political will on the part of the Rouhani administration to step in to guarantee the human rights of its LGBTQ citizens. Barriers to accessing key health services remain in place, leaving online community-based service provision massively overstretched. Social attitudes—although improving—are doing so at a snail's pace, and threats of family abandonment and exclusion remain high.

Despite all these considerable challenges, it is our belief that Iran's LGBTQ community has the imagination, the creative energy, and the willpower to build up powerful digitally rooted institutions and media outlets to advance the cause of LGBTQ equality.

The history of the LGBTQ movement globally has been one of solidarity, resilience and ingenuity in the face of overwhelming state power and societal pressures. Iran's LGBTQ activists and rights advocates have demonstrated these qualities in ample measure, and—in partnership with their allies in the international community—possess the ability to break the silence that has obscured and suffocated the lives of so many LGBTQ Iranians for decades.

Glossary

asexual
A sexual orientation used to describe individuals who lack, or have very low levels of sexual attraction for others.

bisexual
An individual who is sexually attracted to both men and women. It can also be used by some activists as an umbrella term encompassing attraction to more than one gender, in the same sense as pansexual.

CCL
The Iranian Computer Crimes Law, which regulates and restricts a range of online expression.

gay
A term that can be used to describe all homosexual people, but which typically (and within this report) most often refers to homosexual men (cisgender or transgender)

gender
Socially and culturally constructed categories that reflect societal gender roles and a person's internal gender identity.

gender identity
The gender that an individual internally identifies as. This could be the same as their birth gender (in which case they are considered cisgender), or could differ from it (in which case they are considered transgender, or genderqueer).

genderqueer
An umbrella term for gender identities which reject the male/female gender binary, and encompass non-normative gender identities outside of these.

gender reassignment
Procedures that change the physical and sexual characteristics of an individual to reflect those socially associated with their gender identity. Procedures can include surgery and hormone therapy. The term 'gender confirmation' is also used by some segments of the community.

homophobia
A hostility to homosexuality and homosexual people.

Homophobia can be manifested in verbal, psychological, and physical violence against lesbians and gays, as well as systemic forms of discrimination and abuse.

homosexual
An individual who is sexually attracted to their own gender.

IPC
The Iranian Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex sexual activity, and prescribes a range of corporal and capital punishments.

lavat
A Persian term for sodomy. Lavat is technically defined as 'the penetration of a male's penis, up to the point of circumcision, into another male's anus'.

lesbian
A woman (either cisgender or transgender) who identifies as homosexual.

LGBTQ
An acronym used to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community/communities. Different configurations of these initials may refer to different subsections of the wider community (e.g. LGBQ people, LBTQ women)

LGBTQphobia
A hostility to sexual and gender minorities in general. LGBTQphobia can be manifested in verbal, psychological and physical violence against LGBTQ people.

musaheqeh
A Persian term for lesbian sexual activity, technically defined as 'where a female puts her sex organ on the sex organ of another person of the same sex'.

pansexual
A sexual orientation used to describe individuals who reject binary conceptions of sexual orientation, and who are attracted to other individuals irrespective of their sex or gender identity.

queer
A term that carries a number of meanings. It is used by some as an umbrella term to describe all sexual and gender minorities, but can also be used in a more narrow sense to describe individuals who reject normative, binary understandings of gender and sexuality. In Western contexts, queer originated as a homophobic slur, but has since been reclaimed by the community.

sex
Biological categories into which people are assigned on the basis of their reproductive functions. This may differ from a person's gender identity.

sexual orientation
A person's sexual identity with reference to the gender(s) to which they are sexually

attracted. An individual could for instance be attracted to the opposite gender (heterosexual), the same gender (homosexual), both men and women (bisexual), all gender identities (pansexual), or none (asexual).

tafkhiz

A Persian term for non-penetrative sexual activity, roughly equivalent to grinding or frottage. Tafkhiz is technically defined as 'putting a male's penis between the thighs or buttocks of another male'.

transgender/trans

An individual whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Although some transgender/trans people choose to undergo gender reassignment procedures to transition from one gender to another, not all transgender people choose to do this. The term can also be used by some people identifying as genderqueer.

transsexual

An individual whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Although largely interchangeable with 'transgender' or 'trans', this term is typically used to describe trans people who choose to undergo gender reassignment procedures.

Yogyakarta Principles

A document published at a meeting of human rights groups in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2006 describing how international human rights law can be applied to LGBTQ people. The document, while not yet recognised by any United Nations-affiliated bodies, has been recognised as an international standard on LGBTQ rights by institutions such as the Council of Europe and a number of national legislatures.

Annex 1

Survey Demographic Data

HEALTH SURVEY

	Asexual	Bisexual	Hetero-sexual	Homo-sexual	I don't know	I prefer not to say	Pan-sexual	Queer	Grand Total
Female	1	36	5	20	3	3	7	2	77
Gender non-conforming	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	5
Genderqueer	0	7	0	4	0	0	1	2	15
I don't know	0	3	1	4	1	0	1	0	10
Male	2	33	12	123	0	6	10	1	187
Prefer not to answer	0	1	0	6	0	3	1	0	13
Trans Female	0	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	6
Trans Male	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Grand Total	3	82	19	163	4	12	22	6	314

Age	Total
Under 18	23
18-24	109
25-29	78
30-34	62
35-39	26
40-44	11
45-49	1
50 and over	3
Prefer not to answer	1

Location	Total
Iran	244
Europe	23
North America	14
Elsewhere	33

DIGITAL SECURITY SURVEY

	Asexual	Bisexual	Hetero-sexual	Homo-sexual	Other	I prefer not to say	Pan-sexual	Queer	Grand Total
Cis Female	0	16	4	7	1	0	4	0	32
Gender non-conforming	0	1	0	7	0	0	1	0	9
Genderqueer	0	3	0	9	0	1	2	4	19
Cis Male	5	102	11	397	3	21	48	1	588
Prefer not to answer	0	8	0	21	0	11	6	0	46
Trans Male	0	4	1	20	0	0	1	0	26
Trans Female	0	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	7
Grand Total	5	135	17	466	4	33	62	5	727

Age	Total
Under 18	16
18-24	221
25-29	225
30-34	143
35-39	71
40-44	29
45-49	12
50 and over	6
Prefer not to answer	4

Location	Total
Iran	694
Turkey	10
Europe	9
Elsewhere	8
North America	4
Prefer not to answer	2

COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES SURVEY

	Asexual	Bisexual	Hetero-sexual	Homo-sexual	Other	I prefer not to say	Pan-sexual	Queer	Grand Total
Female	1	26	1	11	0	1	4	2	46
Gender non-conforming	0	2	0	6	0	1	2	1	12
Genderqueer	1	5	0	8	0	1	4	3	22
Male	0	118	6	439	3	17	33	1	617
Prefer not to answer	0	8	0	25	0	11	5	0	49
Trans man	0	7	0	33	0	0	7	0	47
Trans woman	1	2	4	3	2	1	0	0	13
Grand Total	3	168	11	525	5	32	55	7	806

Age	Total
Under 18	35
18-24	290
25-29	215
30-34	145
35-39	70
40-44	31
45-49	11
50 and over	6
Prefer not to answer	3

Location	Total
Iran	778
Turkey	8
Europe	6
Elsewhere	4
North America	6
Prefer not to answer	4

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