

LGBT REPUBLIC OF IRAN: AN ONLINE REALITY?

**A Small Media report revealing
how Iran's LGBT communities
use global communications
technology in their everyday lives.**



the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased from 10.5 to 13.5 million (1990–2000).

There are a number of reasons why the public sector has grown so rapidly. One of the main reasons is that the government has increased its spending on public services, such as health care, education and social care. This has led to an increase in the number of public sector employees.

Another reason is that the public sector has become more efficient. This has led to a reduction in the number of public sector employees.

There are a number of reasons why the public sector has become more efficient. One of the main reasons is that the government has introduced a number of reforms to public services.

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A Small Media Report // May 2012

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DEAR READER

// At Small Media, our goal is to promote the flow of information through research, training and technology. We focus on media, because we believe that the struggle over the future of Iran is mediated through media. Media both shapes and gets shaped by closed societies like Iran's.

In our research work at Small Media, we cover misrepresented or underrepresented aspects of media in Iran. We feel that the study of the media sphere in Iran has been overly politicised, and has covered visible aspects at the expense of invisible ones. We believe that the study of suppressed minority communities and their usage of the internet is one such neglected topics. We are interested in finding out how different minorities use the internet to maintain their identity despite repression, making the internet far more than just a tool for '*activism*'.

We will not stop at research. In fact, we consider the research to be the first and vital step towards informing our practical work in the areas of training and technology. This study inspired us to develop and implement an online LGBT dictionary and a series of informative radio programmes for LGBT Iranians.

We hope that this report will encourage others to come up with projects that will benefit the LGBT community in Iran, and we are happy to help as much as we can.

Many thanks,

Mahmood Enayat
Director, [Small Media](#)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LGBT Republic of Iran: Is the internet a safe haven or a honeytrap for LGBT Iranians? The repressive Iranian regime is spilling over into the virtual realm

“The threat of the ‘national internet’, which has been a hot topic in the media of late, is very real for Iran’s minority communities, and because Small Media believes in the power of technology to affect change, we are particularly concerned at the heightened repression of online activity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The voices in our report cry out for action. Not only do LGBT Iranians feel excluded from their society, they also fear entrapment and risk severe punishments, such as torture and even death. In 2007, Ahmadinejad famously denied the existence of homosexuals in Iran. But what thrive beneath the densely woven fabric of the regime are vibrant LGBT communities who need our help”

Dr Bronwen Robertson, Director of Operations, Small Media, 9 May 2012.

INTRODUCTION

// LGBT Iranians are routinely harassed both by society and by the state. Many have been physically tortured and punished and some have been sentenced to death because of their sexual orientation. LGBT issues are extremely taboo and are seldom discussed in Iran's public sphere. One of the few ways LGBT Iranians can express their true selves, find valuable information about sexuality, health and identity, and build a sense of community is through the internet, the use of which is also inherently dangerous in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As an organisation pushing for an increased flow of information in closed societies, Small Media is particularly concerned about how ever-increasing crackdowns on internet freedom will affect the lives of Iran's minority communities, many of whom go online to escape the repressive Iranian regime. However, that repression has followed them online. The lives of the LGBT Iranians we spoke with have inspired this text. This report is a reflection of their thoughts, fears and diverse opinions.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

// With our research, we wanted to discover how LGBT Iranians connect with LGBT movements outside Iran and how they develop a sense of community inside Iran. Analysing online repression, homophobia, and religious attitudes to sexuality gave us a diversity of perspectives to work with. Rather than relying on the voices of Iranian LGBT activists, whose voices resonate across the Persian webosphere, we focused on the (extra)ordinary LGBT internet users of Iran. We gathered together an online focus group of LGBT Iranians and collated a number of vivid first-hand testimonies through theme-based questionnaires. We have been successful in collecting a diverse range of voices, which are represented in the comprehensive case studies at the end of this report.

THE SYSTEMATIC DENIAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY

// The Iranian government denies the existence of homosexuals, criminalises their sexuality and uses homophobic rhetoric in the media. One of Ahmadinejad's most famous catchphrases was uttered during a speech delivered at Columbia University in September 2007: *"In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like you do in your country"*. This combination of denial, ignorance, repression, homophobia and persecution, which LGBT Iranians face on a daily basis, is extremely dangerous. Small Media believes that the comprehensive and systematic denial of the existence of homosexuals in Iran is tactical and we have observed that it is extremely detrimental to the quality of life of Iran's homosexual and bisexual citizens, many of whom feel excluded from and ostracised by society.

"I am a human being but I was created with an imperfection. I'm someone that nobody wants to be friends with, someone that even her own family doesn't like ... I've been unemployed for two years, nobody will employ me because of the way that I am ... I like to be surrounded by people, but people always reject me. It's as if I'm from another planet and they don't want to be seen with me"

Male to female transsexual, 26 years old, from Lorestan

A COUNTRY OF CONTRADICTIONS

// Iran is a country of contradictions. Although homosexual intercourse carries with it the death penalty, there are reports of rape being encouraged by guards in Iran's male-only prisons. Homosexuality is a crime, yet it is also a mental illness and thus a valid reason for applying for an exemption from Iran's loathed compulsory military service.

Homosexuality has always been taboo in Iranian society, but people turned a blind eye to it before the revolution. However, both Iranian society and the Iranian penal code have changed drastically since the monarchy was overthrown in 1979. Were the pre-revolutionary autho-

rities oblivious to the goings-on of the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender individuals around them? Iranian lesbian poet and gay rights activist Saghi Ghahraman said, *“It was after the 1979 revolution that a witch-hunt for gay, lesbian and transsexuals began ... The authorities expect parents, relatives, and friends to punish homosexual members of their own family under Sharia law. Because honestly, society is made up of the same people now as it was a year before the revolution, and if people were so intrinsically homophobic, they would have murdered homosexuals then too, but they didn’t”*

LGBT IN IRAN, AN ONLINE HISTORY

// Internet filtering and surveillance has had an immense impact on the lives of LGBT Iranians. In this report we investigate the risks and rewards embedded in the use of the internet for Iran’s LGBT communities. Blogging has been central to the lives of Iranian LGBTs since it ventured online, but posting content online and interacting with other internet users is also inherently dangerous. LGBT bloggers and social media users living within Iran’s borders must protect their identities stringently and reports of people being entrapped by the authorities on LGBT dating sites are prevalent. Conservative bloggers and religious scholars are also online and they post homophobic content, under their real names, without any repercussions. In Ghome-Loot blog the author writes, *“Through starting this blog I aim to stop the virus of homosexuality one day. I am looking forward to that day”*. But the internet is also a space for empowerment, and Iran’s LGBT authors, who could never approach the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for permission to publish their work, are able to disseminate their work freely online.

CASE STUDIES

// Small Media was privy to a wide range of discussion topics that took place in our online focus group, the most heartrending of which was *‘loneliness and homesickness’*. A number of our group members

were already living outside Iran and had successfully claimed political asylum based on their sexuality. It's not that LGBT Iranians want to leave, it's that most of them feel they have to. They do not want to live in secret anymore. One of our group members said,

"[Leaving Iran] is like throwing a stone into darkness. You feel a sense of freedom but you don't know where your stone will land ... As the time to leave looms closer I get more and more depressed. But I might look back one day and smile about it all ... I'm not afraid of what happens in life because I know God has chosen the best for me ... I'm not religious but I do believe in such things. I am trying to enjoy these last days, but I can't. Even when I'm eating I feel like crying"

We developed a questionnaire based around key themes that we sent to LGBT Iranians across Iran. The questionnaire was based around five themes: trust, coming out, the virtual world, past/present/future, and the reactions of family and friends. Through our research we discovered that LGBT Iranians find it difficult to trust even those closest to them. Coming out is problematic, because reactions from friends and family are unpredictable in a society where sexuality is so taboo. The LGBT Iranians we spoke with have embedded themselves in a virtual world, because it feels safer than the society around them. However, some of the real life risks facing LGBT Iranians have crossed over into the virtual world as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

// LGBT Iranians need a secure online platform for community building that is resilient against the pro-government cyber army and has in-built measures to protect users from entrapment

// Straight and LGBT Iranians in exile need to come out publicly in support for the LGBT rights movement. A 'coming out' campaign would help to reduce the social stigma surrounding LGBT issues

// A physical education programme for transgender Iranians on the ground in Iran could empower and protect the trans community. The framework would simultaneously reinforce a feeling of belonging and selfhood amongst participants

// Young lesbian Iranians need a closed and secure online training platform through which key mentors can train and facilitate a community of activists inside Iran. The Iranian lesbian community is far more hidden than they gay male community and this initiative would encourage them to play a greater part in both LGBT and general society

// LGBT authors cannot approach the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for permission to publish their books. Supporting LGBT authors would impress change upon the landscape of LGBT issues in Iran and pose a stark challenge to heteronormativity and patriarchy in Iran

CONCLUSION

// The primary goal of our report is to demonstrate the remarkable diversity in Iran's LGBT community, but we realise that our report will raise more questions than it will provide answers. In an environment such as that in Iran, where sexuality is so taboo, any and all related discussions that are brought into public social spaces are intrinsically valuable. This report is a starting point, and we hope that other organisations will take up our invitation to get involved.

INTRODUCTION

// In the winter months of 2011, a team from Small Media designed a research project that would examine how diverse groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Iranians use the internet in their everyday lives. As the findings of this report reveal, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran does significantly worse than simply ignore the existence of LGBT Iranians.

LGBT Iranians are routinely harassed both by society and by the state. Many have been physically tortured and punished and some have been sentenced to death because of their sexuality. One of the few ways LGBT Iranians can express their true selves, find information, and build a sense of community is through the internet, the use of which is also inherently dangerous in the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹ LGBT issues are particularly taboo and are seldom discussed in Iran's public sphere.

¹ Many of Iran's diverse ethnic, religious and social minority groups use the internet to foster identity, community growth and stability. Small Media is currently working on a number of projects that investigate how these groups use the internet in order to propose recommendations that could ensure them a more secure future.

Even if homosexuality was decriminalised in the Islamic Republic of Iran it could take decades for it to become socially acceptable. This much is clear, because even though a religious decree issued to transsexual rights campaigner Maryam Hatoun Molkara by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1987 legalised transsexuality, the social stigma attached to transsexualism is unwavering and transphobic abuse remains prevalent. Indeed, sex-change operations for transgender Iranians were legalised after Khomeini issued his fatwa and they have been state-subsidised for more than two decades.

Although this may seem liberal, it is also inherently dangerous. Tragically, many gay and lesbian Iranians feel pressured to consider changing their gender to rectify their so-called ‘*anomaly*’. A 34-year-old lesbian woman from Tehran explained, “*I often feel like I don’t belong to society, and feel like maybe I should change who I am, but I also think about how that [having a sex change] would affect my family.*” Thus, LGBT Iranians have two choices: hide beneath the shroud of their geopolitical borders or abandon everything in order to seek asylum on more liberal shores.

// As an organisation pushing for an increased flow of information in closed societies, Small Media is particularly concerned about how ever-increasing crackdowns on internet freedom will affect the lives of Iran’s minority communities, many of whom go online to build a sense of community beyond the reach of the Iranian regime. Small Media kindly acknowledges the work of all of the consultants and researchers who contributed their time and effort to the creation of this report, including Pouya Alagheband and, most especially, those who wish to remain anonymous for reasons of personal security.

// We sincerely thank our LGBT friends for enabling this research by being so open and honest with us, even when it meant opening old wounds or freshly healed scars. We humbly acknowledge that this report would not exist without their cooperation. The lives of the LGBT Iranians we spoke with inspired this text. This report is a reflection of their thoughts, fears and opinions. While the names were changed to protect the identities of those involved, the stories you read here are very real.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

// Designing and implementing a research methodology that would first connect with Iran's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities online and then examine how they use global communications technologies in their everyday lives was the ultimate goal of this project. We wanted to discover how they link in with LGBT movements outside Iran and how they find friends inside Iran. We also wanted to determine how, whilst standing strong against adversity, they learn more about who they are on an individual level and find companionship, when every aspect of their lives is secret by necessity.

Our project design incorporated a diverse range of primary and secondary sources. We found a wealth of secondary material online in news archives, websites, wikis and blogs. We scoured literature, both in print and online. In many cases, we sought to engage with authors and the generators of online content (bloggers and social media users) in order to bring this secondary data another dimension and/or to clarify

the information they provided. Our most important focus was to gather primary data. We have been successful in collecting a diverse range of voices, which are represented in the comprehensive case studies at the end of this report.

PRIMARY DATA

// At the beginning of our research we established a secret Facebook group for a core group of LGBT Iranians with whom we initiated online contact through various LGBT groups and networks. We wanted to create an online *'focus group'* through which we could test out our research themes and gather first-hand testimony with which to inform and strengthen the recommendations we seek to make to policy makers at the end of the report. We also anticipated that our research group members would be able to help expand our database of interviewees and this proved to be the case. The Facebook group's settings were set to *'secret'* in order to protect the privacy of our vulnerable members and only the administrators (admins) were able to approve new members. This restriction was an attempt to prevent an influx or infiltration of non-LGBT people and to foster a calm and safe environment for our discussions. While initiating discussions around a number of pre-conceived themes, we also encouraged open debate and participant-led discussion.

In addition to the Small Media research team, the group's founding members comprised five gay and lesbian Iranians. At first, the group's settings prevented members from adding their friends without prior approval from an admin, but it soon became apparent that group engagement was declining. We posted a comment to our group members asking them if they would prefer to be able to add their own friends without admin approval, and they unanimously agreed that they would.

This posed its own set of problems since Facebook's settings allow a group member to add another individual to a group without actually inviting them. Thus, a number of people became members of the group without a formal invitation from a pre-existing member. This new method of co-opting members became slightly chaotic, because oftentimes people were completely unaware that they were members of the group. In addition, although we had one transgender member and three lesbian members, the vast majority of the comments posted to the group were from gay males.

// The discussions that took place in the Facebook group inspired us to develop a questionnaire based around a set of main themes: *trust, discovery, coming out, online lives, identity and 'reaction and response'*.

To supplement the data gathered from the Facebook group we sent these questionnaires to a number of LGBT activists and community members both inside and outside Iran. In the initial phases of the project design we attempted to '*cold call*' LGBT Iranians by approaching members of public LGBT groups online; we were lucky if we got one response from every 100 messages we sent.

Right from the outset this demonstrated to us the level of distrust in Iran's LGBT communities and we immediately realised we would have to change our approach. The necessary secrecy that forms the backbone of the everyday lives of Iran's LGBT citizens means that it is intrinsically difficult to develop trust without having inside connections.

In the end, we relied solely on the snowballing technique during the main phases of our data collection. First, we asked our interviewees to introduce us to others they thought might be willing to take part in the project.

We also sent the questionnaire to our contacts in the LGBT communities and asked them to pass it onto their friends, collate the responses for us, and then remove all identifying data so that our respondents would feel secure and trust that their anonymity was being taken most seriously. This proved successful and the questionnaire responses provided a wealth of information.

An overriding difficulty we encountered was that gay and lesbian Iranians, especially those living inside Iran, are extremely 'closeted'. Even those who socialise in the most liberal networks are often immensely afraid of what their family and friends will think. Our team of researchers had a number of connections with liberal intellectuals in the Iranian underground art and music scenes and we approached them for help on the assumption that they would be able to introduce us to LGBT Iranians who we could approach with our questionnaire. A truly enlightening response came from one culturally aware and socially active young artist:

"The thing that I'm preoccupied with right now is the fact that there may be lesbian, gay or bisexual people among my friends, but the atmosphere is like, well, they can't show it or express themselves so that a friend like me would recognize it, so they, like, keep it a secret"

Lesbian activist Shadi Amin confirmed,

"People feel it's safe to come out to me because I'm an activist. For example, I know a woman, a lesbian woman, who has a friend who is also a lesbian. The catch is that I know they're both lesbians, but they have never come out to each other. Unbeknownst to each other, they are even dating the same woman"

SECONDARY DATA

1.2

² For example: homophobia, Islam and sexuality, law and sexuality, history of sexuality in Iran, homosexuality, and transgenderism

// In addition to the wide variety of primary sources delineated above, we also scoured an extensive array of news sources (from ultra-conservative to pro-reform movement) using search queries based around a set of key themes.² We conducted our searches in both Persian and Pnglish (Persian written with the Latin alphabet) and read relevant material in English-language literature and newspapers as well. In addition, we read blogs in both Persian and English, searched Google's news archives, and visited the websites of Iran's religious scholars, reformist politicians, and human rights activists.

We had to be strategic about our web searching in order to find relevant material while harvesting links through search engines. The Persian language provided us with some unique searching capabilities. For example, we used the word '*hamjensbaz*' (homo, a derogatory but commonly used term among non-gay Iranians) when we were searching for data from conservative internet users and homophobic or misinformed content. In contrast, we used the word '*hamjensgara*' (homosexual, a non-derogatory term accepted by Iranian homosexuals) when we wanted to discover more liberal interpretations. Very early on in our research we discovered that the stories we really wanted to hear were also the most difficult to gain access to.

// The loudest online voices are LGBT activists based outside Iran, who no longer live in fear of persecution and can thus speak freely, generating a majority of the Iranian LGBT online content. Activists inside Iran, who usually publish content under pseudonyms, form the second loudest group. Because of the very real risks online actions pose to their livelihood, bloggers based inside Iran are more cautious about revealing their true identity.

The third group, who became our main research focus, are what we call the *'content consumers'* or *'invisible'* users. Although these invisible Iran-based users spend a large part of their day online, they tend not to generate content. In an effort to hear the voices that usually fade into the background, we attempted to target these individuals with our research.

Rather than relying solely on the testimony of activists and bloggers, which is readily available online, we wanted our report to provide commentary from a broad cross-section of LGBT Iranians. The one commonality that links our respondents is that they all use the internet. While internet users do not accurately represent the entire spectrum of Iranian society, like older and poorer LGBT people for example, on the ground research about LGBT issues is extremely risky in Iran. In order to demonstrate just how risky on the ground research would be, we provide a social, political, and historical overview of gender and sexuality in Iran in the next two sections. This overview reveals the extent to which society's mind-set concerning homosexuality has changed since the Iranian Revolution (1979).

THE SYSTEMATIC DENIAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY

“In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like you do in your country... In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don’t know who has told you that we have”

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, September 24, 2007, Columbia University

// In an audience with Columbia University students on Monday 24 September 2007 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brazenly declared, *“In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like you do in your country”*. His audience burst into fits of disbelief-tinged laughter and continued to heckle him for the rest of his speech. This quotation quickly became an Ahmadinejad catchphrase and it has received as much criticism as his statement that Israel should be wiped off the map.

Although he talked about a lot that day at Columbia University, the most memorable thing Ahmadinejad uttered was his quip about homosexuality. We refer to it as a quip because it is completely illogical, unless of course you understand his logic. When Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be wiped off the map, he meant, in rather strong words, that Iran does not recognise Israel as a legitimate country. In fact, Israel is not present on any map or atlas that is published officially in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Israel has already been wiped off Iran’s map.

// Therefore, following this convoluted logic, Ahmadinejad is correct: for no other reason than the fact that the state does not recognise it, homosexuality does not 'exist' in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is this very combination of denial, ignorance and persecution, which LGBT Iranians face on a daily basis, that is so extremely dangerous.

The bastions of the Islamic Republic fully realise that an established (albeit secretive) LGBT community exists beneath the folds of fundamentalism and, figuratively speaking, the authorities are doing their utmost to sweep the community under a densely woven Persian rug. // Small Media believes that the comprehensive and systematic denial of the existence of homosexuals in Iran is tactical and we have observed that it is extremely detrimental to the quality of life of Iran's homosexual and bisexual citizens, many of whom feel excluded from and ostracised by society.

// The logic behind the Iranian government's denial of the existence of homosexuals is simple: if something does not exist it is not eligible for basic human rights.

The logic behind the Iranian government's denial of the existence of homosexuals is simple: if something does not exist it is not eligible for basic human rights. The Iranian government denies LGBT Iranians a voice and it does its utmost to prevent them from interacting with each other or speaking out in public. Nonetheless we found a vibrant community of LGBT Iranians to be very much alive online.

Although most LGBT Iranians live intensely secretive lives in the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's bold statement ignited a spark in their rights movement. Masoumeh Naseri of Radio Zamaneh published an article called "A slice of Iran's forbidden life" one week after Ahmadinejad's controversial address at Columbia

University. Written as a reaction to Ahmadinejad's claim, Naseri attempted to "pursue Mr. President's words and see if there are really no homosexuals in Iran or if Mr. Ahmadinejad just doesn't know where they are" (Naseri 2007). Mani, a 24-year-old gay Iranian male who had recently settled in the Netherlands, told the interviewer,

"First, I'd just like to thank Ahmadinejad for saying those things because it finally brought us into the spotlight ... How many of us are there? We are innumerable! ... We breathe; we inhale oxygen, we produce carbon dioxide ... We go to coffee shops. Mellat Park, Friday nights. Just go to Strawberry Restaurant and see for yourself! We exist! And Mr. Ahmadinejad just needs to open his eyes"

A number of individuals in Iran's LGBT community told us that Ahmadinejad's statement had inspired rather than concerned them. The Columbia speech was also the inspiration behind the 'We Are Everywhere' campaign, an online uprising established to coincide with the International Day Against Homophobia. We refer to this campaign in the section on online homophobia. Nonetheless, while Iranian LGBTs may be 'everywhere', they are also extremely ostracised by society, secreted away and forced to live their lives in private.

Presented below is a collection of five statements by diverse members of the LGBT community. All of them reflect a sense of disconnect between the lives they live and the society around them. None of the people we spoke with feel as though they truly 'belong'; they see themselves as being 'imperfect', as if from another planet, isolated from the general current, and prevented from participating in society as their true selves.

GAY MALE, 26 YEARS OLD, FROM BANDAR ANZALI

"If I said I saw myself as being part of this society, I'd be telling the biggest lie. I don't see myself as part of this society at all. That's because of my homosexuality and the mentality of Iranians about homosexuality ... I usually refer to Iran as 'your country' instead of 'my country' or 'our country'"

MALE TO FEMALE TRANSSEXUAL, 26 YEARS OLD, FROM LORESTAN

"I am a human being but I was created with an imperfection. I'm someone that nobody wants to be friends with, someone that even her own family doesn't like ... I've been unemployed for two years, nobody will employ me because of the way that I am ... I like to be surrounded by people, but people always reject me. It's as if I'm from another planet and they don't want to be seen with me"

GAY MALE, 27 YEARS OLD, QAZVIN

"It's very hard to live as a homosexual in this country. Is it me or is it the culture, society, history or all of them? Loneliness is killing me. One of the reasons that I can't find a partner is that I live in the provinces. Qazvin.³ You may laugh, but despite all of the historical discussions, there is really not much going on here"

³ Qazvin is a city 165km northwest of Tehran, the population is around 350,000 people. The people of Qazvin are often the subject of scorn because a majority of Iran's homophobic jokes feature men from Qazvin as symbolic representations of homosexuality.

LESBIAN, 34 YEARS OLD, TEHRAN

“I’d like to leave Iran; I’m getting pretty sick of people ... Maybe I’d go to London or Irvine. I’d like to be a basketball coach, but to be a DJ would be my ideal job ... in general I haven’t had many problems but I often feel like I don’t belong to society”

GAY MALE, AGE NOT DISCLOSED, TEHRAN

“I’m opposed to the Islamic government and religion in all forms and I’m especially opposed to people like Khatami [the reformists] ... because I feel like they are more dangerous for people like me [homosexuals]. They know how to control society while deeply embedding religion in it. If by ‘taking part’ you mean to ask whether or not I collaborated with ‘the general public’ for ‘reform’, then no, and I would never ever do something like that. But I will do anything, absolutely anything, to support the best interests of myself and other homosexuals. From a social perspective, I am not at all a passive member, but I don’t work with the general society because I actually consider it to be my enemy, which I need to fight against”

The above quotations reveal a vast chasm between general society and the LGBT community in Iran. These five respondents feel disenfranchised because both society and state reject them.

// What is the source of all this hatred? The next section of this report provides an overview of Iran’s unique socio-political situation. This contextual summary lends insight into the apparatuses and mechanisms that impinge upon the lives of LGBT Iranians.⁴ The issue of LGBT rights is intrinsically complicated in Iran. Although an in depth discussion of Iran’s social and political history is beyond the scope of our report, this overview will provide grounding for those needing an introduction to

⁴ *Although we briefly discuss the relationship between Islam and homosexuality in section four of this report, >>*

*the reader should refer to
Habib (2010), Kugle (2010),
and Murray and Roscoe (1997)
for more in depth discussions
about the complex
relationship between religion
and sexuality in Muslim
countries.*

the social, historical and political status of LGBT individuals in the Iranian context. Because the primary focus of our research and reportage is to examine how LGBT communities both in Iran and in exile use global communications technologies in their everyday lives, we refer the reader to other more in-depth resources when possible.

A COUNTRY OF CONTRADICTIONS: PERSECUTION, PUNISHMENT AND PRIVILEGE

// We begin this section by exploring the persecution of homosexuals in Iran through an analysis of the laws concerning homosexuality in Iran, focusing particularly on how these laws changed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The regime change that followed the revolution was accompanied by a simultaneous shift in social mind-set, and this is also the focus of our investigation. We examine the wording of contemporary Iran's penal code, which outlines the conviction procedure and the punishments for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Iranians. In the second part of this section, we turn to investigate how and why same-sex intercourse is reportedly encouraged in Iran's prisons. We conclude this chapter by looking at homosexuality from the perspective of being a *'privileged'* status for some, as it proffers gravitas in asylum cases and allows exemption from compulsory military service.

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY PLEASURE, POST-REVOLUTIONARY PAIN?

// Homosexuality has always been taboo in Iranian society. Although not necessarily frowned upon across all sectors of society, it is rarely discussed. A number of our respondents informed us that many people simply turned a blind eye to homosexuality before the revolution. // Were they oblivious to the goings-on of the genderqueer, lesbian, bisexual, gay and transsexual individuals around them or was their ignorance a sign of a more liberal mind-set? Iranian lesbian poet and gay rights activist Saghi Ghahraman (in Abou-Alsamh 2011) said,

“[Before the revolution], nobody paid attention to what girls did when they got together. Parents thought it was the safe way to have girls mingle only with girls, and this gave us a lot of room to explore ... It [lesbianism] was practiced, but wasn’t talked about ... All the harsh treatment, the stigma and horror around gay men and lesbians began right after the Revolution with the strong force of the regime encouraging parents and the public to harass homosexuals”

In an interview with Small Media she continued,

“Relationships came my way very naturally and very easily before the revolution. The relationships were not spoken but mostly acted upon ... For example, in my dorm room at university I slept in the same bed with my girlfriend, in her arms and her love for four years, but we never talked about what it was. We spent every minute of our time together, and shared emotions we never shared with our male partners, but we never talked of our relationship as something tangible. Even in high school, what I shared with my girlfriends was not put into words. It was not acknowledged but it was certainly there”

In an exclusive interview with Small Media, women's rights activist and lesbian campaigner Shadi Amin said,

“Before the revolution it wasn't really ‘easier’ for lesbians, it was just easier to hide it. Actually, it was ‘easier’ after the revolution because men and women were so segregated. But let's be clear, this segregation didn't cause homosexuality, it just allowed it to flourish”

The available English-language literature depicts pre-revolutionary Iran as a haven for homosexuality and homoerotic behaviour. Whether this is true is the subject of some debate, especially considering that the terms *'homosexual'*, *'lesbian'* and *'gay'* are Western constructs with very specific contexts and histories of use. Westerners visiting Iran are often surprised by the level of physical contact between men with their male friends and by how intimate women are in their platonic friendships with other women. Indeed, as one of our female researchers experienced, walking down the street hand-in-hand with a same-sex partner drew less attention than hugging a male friend during a greeting.

Figure 1

Two young men embrace each other in a park on a balmy evening, but they're more interested in the girls. Photograph by Stina Bäcker, used with permission.



As the photo in Figure 1 reveals, young heterosexual men gathered in the park to ‘bird watch’ are, by Western standards, overly comfortable in each other’s presence. Iran’s politicians have also brought this intimacy into public scrutiny. For example, a 2009 blog post by Neo-Resistance, a blogger who discusses “All you wanted to know about Iran but were afraid to ask”, entitled “The Romantic (President ... cough cough) Ahmadinejad!”, comprises a series of pictures of Ahmadinejad engaging in close physical contact with other political figures and high-ranking officials.⁵

⁵ Neoresistance’s blog post is available from <http://iranfacts.blogspot.com/2009/12/romantic-president-cough-cough.html>

We want to emphasise the fact that the gender binary has been relatively fluid at points throughout Iran’s history. In her research, Afsaneh Najmabadi refers to a time during the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925) when strong muscular women with moustaches and monobrows were prized for their beauty and the men of the court idolised pre-pubescent boys who they employed in a position of servitude and entertainment (Najmabadi 2005). Today, it is no longer fashionable for women to have moustaches, quite the opposite – they often seek to remove all of their body hair. Laser hair removal is a booming

trade in Iran. Although it is common for both straight and gay Iranian men to shave their armpits and pubic regions for purported hygiene reasons, men tend to refrain from plucking their eyebrows as this is considered to be an indication of homosexuality.

// In an article for Ynet News, Dudi Cohen writes about activist and blogger Faruh, who was involved with reformist candidate Mehdi Karoubi's campaign during the 2009 presidential elections. Forty days after the death of Neda Agha Soltan, Faruh and a few friends observed the Islamic mourning rites and went into the street to pin commemoration notices onto power poles and newsagent stalls. Faruh narrates being attacked by plain-clothes members of the Basij, a voluntary militia group aligned with the Supreme Leader, who blindfolded him and took him to an unknown location. When his attackers saw that his eyebrows had been plucked, they assumed he was gay and raped him and beat him. Faruh said, "They did things I don't want to remember" (in Cohen, 2010).

Just as it is no longer fashionable for women to sport moustaches and monobrows, men's fashions are also constantly evolving. It is becoming fashionable in some circles for men to style their facial hair in non-conventional ways, again pushing at the gender binary and at the conceptual boundaries of masculinity and femininity in the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁶

⁶ *At the end of 2011 Shahrefarang website published a collection of weird and wonderful images from Iran's unofficial pop singers. See <http://shahrefarang.com/iranian-hair-beauty-styles-men/>*

PERSECUTION

3.2

// According to Iran's penal code, which the High Expediency Council ratified on 28 November 1991, the punishment for sodomy (Persian, *lavvat*) is death and a Sharia judge is vested with the power to determine the form of execution (Article 110).⁷

⁷ The penal code of Iran is available in English at http://mehr.org/Islamic_Penal_Code_of_Iran.pdf and in Persian at http://www.1vakil.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=63&limitstart=5

The penal code defines 'sodomy' as sexual intercourse involving two males (Article 108) and both the 'active' and the 'passive' partner will be condemned to death (Article 109) if convicted under Sharia law. Sodomy is proved either through confession (Article 114) or through the testimony of four men who have observed the occurrence (Article 117). Sodomy is punishable by death if both partners are 'mature' and the intercourse is consensual (Article 111), but if a mature man of sound mind "commits sexual intercourse" with an underage man, the "doer will be killed" and the passive partner will be subject to a punishment of 74 lashes "if not under duress" (Article 112).

If two underage men are caught having consensual sex, both of them will be sentenced to 74 lashes (Article 113). The punishment for *tafhiz* (frottage; non-penetrative sex) is 100 lashes for each party (Article 121) but if *tafhiz* is committed and punished three times, the fourth conviction will result in the death penalty (Article 122).

If sodomy or *tafhiz* is proved by confession and the guilty party repents, the Sharia judge may request the Supreme Leader to pardon him (Article 126). *Mosahegheh* (lesbianism) is proved either by confession or through the testimony of four men who have observed the occurrence (Article 128).

Punishment for lesbianism is 100 lashes for each party (Article 129) and there will be no distinction made between the doer

and subject or whether the person is Muslim or non-Muslim during sentencing (Article 130). If the act of lesbianism is repeated and results in a conviction a total of three times, then the fourth conviction will bring about the death penalty (Article 131).

While the pre-revolutionary punishment for homosexuality was worded with less clarity, it was far less severe, except in cases where abuse or rape was involved. Article 207 of Iran's pre-revolutionary penal code set forth, *"Anyone who violates a woman by harshness or threat will be condemned to imprisonment with hard labour for 3 to 10 years; the same punishment is ordained to anyone who commits buggery, and whenever buggery is committed with violence or threat, the sentence will be the severest punishment"*. // On New Year's Eve, 1990, Iran's Chief Justice Morteza Moghtadai outlined a new policy for those convicted of homosexuality in the Islamic Republic,

"They are either to be 'beheaded by a sword'; 'stoned to death'; 'thrown down from a height such as a mountain or tall building'; 'suffocated under the rubble of a wall demolished on their head'; or 'burned alive'... It is even permitted that in punishing such a despicable act, one of the first four punishments be implemented and then have their corpse burned"

On the very day that Moghtadai made this announcement, three men accused of homosexuality were publicly beheaded and two women accused of lesbianism were stoned to death (in Anderson, 1990). The tragedy of homosexuals being executed in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be overlooked, but the fact that they are commonly executed on trumped up charges detracts from the hatred and homophobia embedded in these dire violations of their human rights.

There have been a few exceptions to this. On 7 September 2011 Saeed Kamali Dehghan reported for the Guardian that three gay Iranian men had been executed in the southwest city of Ahvaz. This time there were no additional charges or exaggerated claims (Dehghan 2011). Dehghan quoted from a press release published by a national Iranian news agency, which is thus representative of the official standpoint of the Iranian government: *“The three convicts were sentenced to death based on Articles 108 and 110 of Iran’s Islamic penal code, for acts against the Sharia law and bad deeds”* (Dehghan 2011).

PUNISHMENT

3.3

// Although prevalent (based on the experiences and observations of our consultants) and relatively easy to enter into if you have the propensity, acts of intimacy between same-sex partners can result in severe punishments such as flogging and, in some cases, the death penalty. While there are no official statistics concerning exactly how many gay men and women have been executed in Iran, the routine harassment of homosexuals and their systematic torture lends weight to the conservative estimate that at least *1,000 homosexual Iranians have been convicted and sentenced to death since the Iranian Revolution in 1979*.⁸

⁸ *There are no official records detailing how many homosexual Iranians have been executed since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. Unofficial estimates range from 400 to 5,000 but there is no way of knowing which of these is closer to the truth.*

In December 2010 Human Rights Watch published the report *“We are a buried generation”*, which outlines a number of infringements on the human rights of LGBT Iranians.⁹

// Not only is it extremely unlikely that Iran’s ultraconservative government would ever release official statistics concerning such a matter, but LGBT Iranians are also frequently prosecuted on trumped up charges of rape, fraud, or treason in order to *‘justify’* their executions. This means that it is impossible to

⁹ *The Human Rights Watch report is available for free download from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/12/15/we-are-buried-generation>*

tabulate the exact number of executed, imprisoned or tortured LGBT individuals.

The Islamic Republic is most certainly a confusing maze of contradictions. Although homosexuality is a crime in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is used as punishment and condoned as a form of torture in some sectors. Saeed Kamali Dehghan (2011) brought this atrocity to light in The Guardian newspaper saying,

“A series of dramatic letters written by prisoners and families of imprisoned activists allege that authorities are intentionally facilitating mass rape and using it as a form of punishment”

In his article, Dehghan refers to a statement submitted to opposition website Jaras, in which an unnamed family member of a political prisoner states,

“During exercise periods, the strong ask for sex without any consideration. Criminals are repeatedly seen with condoms in hand, hunting for their victims ... if the inmate is not powerful enough or [the] guards would not take care of him, he will be certainly raped”

¹⁰ *The Iranian government systematically filters any websites deemed to be against Islamic values. Many Iranians, particularly the ones with whom we spoke, are adept at working around the Iranian government’s internet filtering regime.*

According to the HRANA (Human Rights Activists News Agency) website, which is filtered by the Iranian government,¹⁰ the officers in Iran’s notorious Rajaeeshahr prison hand out condoms to those prisoners who are known to rape younger and more susceptible inmates (HRANA 2010).

// Iranian officials have ignored the allegations but journalist and political prisoner Mehdi Mahmoudian, who was held in Rajaeeshahr prison, confirmed them in an open letter (in Kalame 2011), excerpts of which were published on Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s news website.

“In Rajaeshahr prison anyone who is a little bit ‘pretty,’ demonstrates a lack of physical strength, or doesn’t have any money in their bank accounts to pay off their attacker with a bribe, is forced into different cells [to be raped] and they are rotated around different cells each night. Every ‘object’ [passive sex partner] has a pimp who makes an income from doing this and after a few times they sell him onto the next guy ... Across Rajaeshahr prison sodomy is both commonplace and accepted”

“Amnesty International’s 2010 report is available online at <http://report2010.amnesty.org/>

In its 2010 annual report, Amnesty International documented an open letter signed by 26 political prisoners and addressed to the prison board. The open letter confirms the rape and torture of inmates and calls for a stop to harassment tactics, which includes sexual assault, of prisoners by guards and intelligence officers.” The family members of victims have also confirmed that prison authorities ignore complaints of rape. Hadi Ghaemi, the director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, stated (in Kellogg 2011),

“We know rape was used as a form of punishment against post-election protestors on a wide scale, and within prisons today, rape appears to be common, encouraged by prison guards as a way to punish targeted prisoners”

// In addition, a former member of the Basij security forces informed Amnesty International that dozens of boys had been rounded up in Shiraz following the 2009 protests against the presidential elections, held captive in shipping containers and systematically raped. After expressing concerns to his leader, the former Basiji was detained for 100 days and beaten before facing a mock execution (Amnesty International 2011).

IS HOMOSEXUALITY ALSO A PRIVILEGE?

3.4

// Homosexuality may be a crime punishable by death in the Islamic Republic, but it is also classified as a mental illness and personality disorder. This means that gay Iranian males have the right to apply for a military exemption based on their sexuality, an exemption that is but a small reprieve in a lifetime of persecution. Harsh rules, substandard working conditions and non-payment for services proffered to the military means that a majority of those eligible for conscription are desperately seeking to evade it.

Figure 2

“Reason for exemption: Medical, Article 33, Band 8” is emblazoned on Raham’s military exemption card. The picture is available from <http://littledictatorship.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/untitled-1.jpg?w=426>



During the course of our research, we came across a blog called Our Little Dictatorship.¹² The blog’s authors, Raha and Raham, share the same birthday but it is not clear whether they are biological or coincidental twins. Raha lives in Belgium and Raham lives in Tehran. On 27 October 2010 Raham posted a picture of his newly acquired military exemption card (see Figure 2) to Our Little Dictatorship proclaiming excitedly, “It’s Over!”¹³ This exemption card is Raham’s pass to freedom. In addition to not having to undertake 18 months of compulsory military service, it enables him to travel outside Iran – providing he can

¹² Raha and Raham’s blog *Our Little Dictatorship* is available at <http://littledictatorship.wordpress.com/>

¹³ Iranian males are typically prohibited from leaving Iran when they turn 18. Their travel rights are not >>

reinstated until they finish military service or acquire a valid exemption.

¹⁴ *The Board of Directors of the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973, six years before the Iranian Revolution.*

get a visa for the destination country. Blog reader Yusef asked Raham, *“But doesn’t the category you’ve received the exemption under make it obvious [that you’re gay]? If you try to get a job with this card won’t it cause you a lot of bother?”* Raham replied, *“No my friend, it won’t be a problem because this band is for mental illnesses and it doesn’t specify anywhere that it is for being gay.”*¹⁴

Yusef was right to ask Raham whether the exemption code would prevent him from finding work. // Gay men and transsexual women have been excluded from employment opportunities because they have to present their exemption cards to potential employers. However, since private companies seldom pay attention to a potential employee’s right to work, this generally only poses a problem for those who want to work in the public sector. Indeed, many conscientious objectors have been employed in the private sector without experiencing any repercussions at all. Furthermore, some of Iran’s more liberal thinkers are working toward rectifying these injustices, but only for transsexual women. Director of Social Welfare, Hasan Mousavi has campaigned to have the words *“mental disorder”* removed from the exemption cards of transsexual soldiers. Speaking with Fars News in 2010, Mousavi noted,

“These people [transsexual women] are considered citizens by society, but the government sees them another way ... In the future, the exemption codes for diabetes and endocrine disorders will be used instead”

The text on Raham's exemption card reads, "*Reason for exemption: Medical, Article 33, Band 8*". A description on Iran's official police website explains that Article 33 facilitates exemptions for people with '*various mental illnesses*' and that Band 8 is for,

"Any person with a behavioural disorder (neurological and psychological imbalance) who demonstrates any behaviour that is in contradiction with military dignities, as well as any moral or sexual deviations such as transsexualism"

Anybody who can satisfactorily prove they qualify under these terms is "*permanently exempt from military service*".¹⁵

15 Compulsory military service usually lasts 18 to 24 months and exemption regulations are strict. It is sometimes possible to buy an exemption, but this is risky, expensive and highly illegal. Exemptions are highly prized. The official information concerning the different categories of and reasons for military exemptions is available on Iran's official police website at <http://www.police.ir>

// So, just how does one go about satisfactorily proving they qualify for this exemption? After a number of his readers requested help with gaining their exemption through comments to his blog Raham took it upon himself to write a thirteen page step-by-step guide to the process, which he published online on his personal blog My Ordinary Gay Day on 10 November 2010. The post includes a link to a rather professionally designed PDF file providing detailed instructions on how to be officially '*diagnosed*' as a homosexual and how to go about gaining the official exemption.¹⁶

Raham advises his readers that, after receiving an official diagnosis from a medical professional, they must take the signed form to the police before heading to the hospital where they will be examined once again to determine if they are '*truly*' homosexual. After the hospital board confirms the patient's sexual orientation, the final frontier is the military board. Raham starts his step-by-step guide with a warning against selecting the wrong medical professional.

16 Raham's personal blog is available at <http://mygday.wordpress.com/>. The PDF file explaining the process of gaining exemption is available at http://www.joopea.com/files/written/JoopeA_WFi-le6343B-w513iU.pdf

“The most important thing is to find a doctor with a valid medical council number to sign the form. Don’t go to Dr Bahrami. Dr Bahrami and his colleagues have made a lucrative business out of helping people with these forms ... And never joke with the psychiatrist. Be very honest and go there a couple of times before even mentioning that you would like him to sign the form for you ... [in the hospital] you should be prepared for any insult they will throw at you ... and it’s advisable to have a tranquilliser and a lot of sugar before you go in there ... I tried very hard to go to the military board without my parents there but they forced me to and they tried to humiliate my parents so that they might try to change my mind. codes for diabetes and endocrine disorders will be used instead”

// In February 2012 Small Media contacted Raham to ask him how many people had downloaded his PDF file and viewed his blog post. He replied that it was impossible to determine exactly how many people had downloaded the file since it had also been distributed through 5pesar’s popular weblog and Facebook page. This post still receives the most traffic of all of Raham’s blog posts, getting around 20-25 views per day.

Raham’s exemption post received around 200 hits per day when it was first uploaded. In total, the post has received about 9,000 hits. The file has been downloaded 500 times through his personal weblog and the post has received 125 comments thus far. On 1 January 2011 Raham posted a graph of statistics from WordPress to his blog. During 2010 his blog had 1,300 unique visitors. In terms of traffic, the busiest day of the year for Raham was November 12, when 203 visitors read *“Military Exemption Guide”*.

We asked Raham if he had received any feedback from people who had been successful in attaining an exemption by following his instructions. On 14 February 2012 he replied,

“People are pretty lazy at giving feedback, especially because many of them don’t know that I’m the original source of the report. But a lot of people have called me, and many more have just talked about it in their friendship circles instead. I’ve had more than 20 phone calls and 100 comments on the page. Seven people have confirmed they’ve been successful, but I guess there’s many more”

We also asked Raham why he and others are so desperate to evade military service, why gay men are eligible to apply for exemption even though by doing so they are technically confessing to a crime, whether the examination procedure is invasive, and whether the exemption code given to gay men prevents them from finding employment. He replied,

“Military service is awful for all boys, not just gays. So everyone tries to get an exemption not to have to go ... labour with no earnings, a waste of time for two years, a total waste of energy and a source of intense depression ... this is why people will suffer going through the exemption process for a month, so they don’t have to suffer for two years ... being homosexual/transsexual is also an illness according to their law. They just think, “What if we send a gay man to sleep in a dorm with thousands of other boys?” And the answer is not ok for them. So they give gay men this exception ... The hospital board doesn’t physically examine you. They used to, even just a few years ago, but not now. Now they just ask questions and undertake some tests to figure it out ... the problems gays have finding employment are the same as for others who get an exemption for a psychological disease. They cannot be teachers, managers of educational organizations, or anything involving children. But I’ve had no problems and neither have my friends. I gave a copy of my military card to my company, they never asked how I got the exemption and none of the friends I’ve asked have had any problems”

Although we will never be able to find out exactly how many people have downloaded and read Raham's "*Military Exemption Guide*" since it was first published, or how many of those readers have successfully gained exemption from the military based on their sexuality, the publishing and distribution of the guide is a perfect example of how the internet has been used in a very particular context to achieve a very particular goal. The guide is by far the most popular of Raham's blog entries. Raham recognised a niche lurking in the comments of his original blog post on *Our Little Dictatorship*. His readers were both envious and impressed that he had successfully gained an exemption and that it did not seem to be affecting his life negatively. Raham then translated his experience into an easily digested format using the technology available to him and made the information freely accessible online.

// The narratives that conclude this report demonstrate how important the internet is to LGBT Iranians. *Even more inspiring are the diverse ways they use the internet to build community.*

Over the past decade the internet's popularity has increased significantly in Iran and accessibility has simultaneously permeated all corners of the country. In the next section, we analyse how diverse uses of the internet have developed according to the needs of both the LGBT community and its detractors. We first examine the internet's value from the perspective of LGBT bloggers before moving into an analysis of online scholarly debates concerning the ongoing conflict between Islam and homosexuality. // We then assess how successful the internet has been at playing '*cupid*' to LGBT Iranians and investigate how it has been deployed as an apparatus for publishing censored literature and subverting the Iranian regime.

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are illiterate has increased from 400 million to 600 million.

There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the population of the world is growing very rapidly. Another is that the number of people who are illiterate in the developed countries is increasing. This is because many people in these countries are not going to school, and many of those who do go to school are not learning to read and write. In the developing countries, the situation is even worse. Many children do not go to school at all, and many of those who do go to school are not learning to read and write.

There are a number of reasons for this. One is that many people in the developing countries are poor, and they cannot afford to send their children to school. Another is that many of the schools in these countries are of very poor quality, and they do not provide a good education. In addition, many of the children in these countries are working in the streets, and they do not have time to go to school.

There are a number of things that can be done to help reduce the number of illiterate people in the world. One is to provide more schools, especially in the developing countries. Another is to improve the quality of the schools that are already there. This can be done by providing teachers with more training and resources, and by providing students with better textbooks and materials. In addition, it is important to provide more opportunities for people to learn to read and write, especially for those who are poor and who do not have access to schools.

There are a number of organizations that are working to help reduce the number of illiterate people in the world. One of the most well-known is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO has a program called the International Literacy Year (ILY), which was held in 1990. The ILY was a global effort to raise awareness of the importance of literacy and to provide more opportunities for people to learn to read and write.

There are a number of other organizations that are also working to help reduce the number of illiterate people in the world. These include the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and the International Labour Organization. Each of these organizations has its own programs and initiatives aimed at improving literacy and education in the developing world.

It is important to continue to work to reduce the number of illiterate people in the world. Literacy is a key to economic development and social progress, and it is essential for people to be able to read and write in order to participate fully in society. We must continue to provide more opportunities for people to learn to read and write, and we must continue to improve the quality of the education that is available to all.

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LGBT IRAN, AN ONLINE HISTORY

// This section draws on both secondary and primary sources to provide an overview of how the internet has influenced the everyday lives of LGBT Iranians. First, we examine an online *'blogging game'* that discusses the inaugural queer blogs and the reception they received from their target audiences. Then we scrutinise the impact that internet filtering and surveillance has had on the lives of LGBT Iranians. In an investigation into filtering, we examine creative responses to it and probe into how tech savvy internet users get around the inconveniences caused by internet filtering.

Exploring the possibility that the Iranian government uses these websites to entrap gay Iranians and gather intelligence on their communities, we investigate the risks and rewards of using social media to find dates. Finally, we delve into Ketabkhaneh88, an online queer book fair that hosts a collection of books by some of Iran's LGBT authors.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

4.1

¹⁷ *The Khaneh Honar blog is available at <http://khanehonar2.blogspot.co.uk/>*

// Blogging has been central to the Iranian LGBT community since it ventured online. Khaneh Honar (Art House), which first appeared around the end of 2004, provided a roundup report of the LGBT weblogs every Friday morning.¹⁷ This service recorded all of those blogs that were discontinued and also listed those that had been blocked or removed at the insistence of the regime. Blogging platforms hosted in Iran, like Blogfa and Persian Blog, are obliged to obey the rules of the Islamic Republic. These platforms, unlike Wordpress and Blogspot, are not filtered in Iran. In fact, the government supports these platforms and many conservative bloggers make good use of them.

It is far riskier for LGBT and opposition bloggers to host their blogs inside Iran, due to the potential repercussions, but hosting their blog on a blocked platform creates a digital divide. Only tech savvy individuals can access blocked content, and the blanket filtering of platforms like Wordpress and Blogspot cuts off LGBT luddites from critical information. Khaneh Honar was originally hosted on the Blogfa platform. In 2006, after it became too risky for the blog's Iran-based author to upload content to the blog, Khaneh Honar was transferred to Blogspot and someone outside the country took over responsibility for uploading the content. Khaneh Honar is an archive of the most important and poignant posts to be published in the LGBT Iranian blogosphere. Others, like blogger 5pesar, have also tried to capture a timeline of the community.

On 29 March 2008 prominent gay Iranian blogger 5pesar started an interactive discussion online. The aim of the blogging 'game' was to delineate the history of the queer blogosphere and to celebrate Iran's online LGBT history.¹⁸

¹⁸ *The word 'game' is used here as a direct translation from the Persian and should >>*

*be interpreted as
'participatory discussion'.
It should not be understood in
the Western context,
which would insinuate that
this was either fun and/or
competitive.*

// 5pesar invited his readers to participate with this request,

"A while ago, I said that I was determined to kick off a blogging game. Because the theme of this year's Blogistan Anniversary is 'blogging games', and everyone is getting involved in one form or another, I thought we should also play a game! So here's the game. Let's all say what the first queer blog we saw was, and how it made us feel. It's as simple as that!"¹⁹

¹⁹ 5pesar's online game "The first queer blog I saw", published on 29 March 2008, is available online from <http://5pesar.wordpress.com/2008/03/29/web/>

5pesar invited seven prominent Iranian bloggers, not all of whom are gay, to participate in his game: Web2, 1pezeshk, Kamangir, Delbastegihaye Mardaneh, Saghi Ghahraman, Mirzakasrabakhtiyar and Falch. The blogs of Falch and Delbastegihaye Mardaneh are no longer available online. Neither 1pezeshk nor Mirzakasrabakhtiyar acknowledged the invitation nor posted anything relevant to the 'game' in the following days. In a brief one-line blog entry, Saghi Ghahraman acknowledged two blogs that were influential to her, both of which are now defunct.

In the comments on 5pesar's blog post, Amir Pourshariati noted,

"The first Iranian homosexuals online had HTML homepages because blogs didn't even exist then. And maintaining an HTML page wasn't easy. At first Iranian homosexuals were using Yahoo Clubs which then became Yahoo Groups and these sites had a similar format to blogs. So we can't say that weblogs were the beginning of everything, because homosexuality was online before that. The first Iranian website for homosexuals was called Gay Iran and even now, when I start talking about it I get goose bumps. The disappearance of the Gay Iran website has left a gaping hole and perhaps nothing will ever replace it"

On 1 April 2008 Web2, otherwise known as Mhmazidi uploaded his response,²⁰

²⁰ "Degarbash", Web2's response to 5pesar's online game is available from <http://mhmazidi2.wordpress.com/2008/04/01/others>

"I don't usually have the time or energy to take part in blogging games ... [but] one of my gay blogging friends has invited us all to write about the first queer blogs we read. Personally, I've always tried to read as many gay weblogs as I can and the truth is that I can't remember which one was the first and when it was. So, let me talk about something else ... Naturally, one of the most different minorities, at least for me who is a heterosexual, are people who are known as homosexuals. In the real world, for better or for worse, they cannot express their true selves. The internet, a very rich source, came to my aid ... I wanted to understand homosexuality through these bloggers ... Weblogs, particularly gay weblogs, have helped me to understand and be nicer and more humane ... It makes no difference to me whether weblog X or weblog Y was the first one I read, what's important is that I'm basically indebted to all of them"

// Web2's article received mixed reactions, the most cutting of which has been translated here. Homophobia and transphobia is prevalent online and, hiding behind the security of a computer monitor, many relish the chance to speak out against sexual minorities. On 4 April 2008 Sobhane said,

"In my opinion, to write such a story, which is neither for nor against those 'homos', is just giving them recognition and publicity. Yes, I believe in the ideals of the West, and I who have a high regard for myself and my people and our morals am sorry to have to say this, but this article has brought you down in my opinion and perhaps the opinion of many others. Others might not be bold enough to post a comment about it though"

On the same day, Mehrnoosh Mahtashami commented, "The ones [homosexuals] I've seen have pretty much all been immoral". A few minutes earlier she had commented on 5pesar's original post,

"I think you have made a mistake. You need to actually invite people who are against homosexuals to take part in the discussion so that you can find out what people really think about you. It's of no value just finding out what like-minded people think"

5pesar responded,

"Mehrnoosh dear, many of our friends would disagree with you and would argue that homophobic people should not take part in this game!"

Despite the ease with which many expressed their homophobic beliefs in the blog post's comments, a handful of gay bloggers expressed gratitude to Web2 for helping to raise their visibility. On 2 April 2011 'Behbod' said, "As a homosexual I would like to thank you for dealing with these issues in a logical and excellent manner".

// Small Media believes that it is extremely important for Iranians who are supportive of the LGBT rights movement to express their solidarity publicly, especially those who are not gay themselves. *Iran's LGBT communities need to feel supported by as many strata of society as possible and when Iranian society embraces Iran's LGBT citizens they will flourish.*

Popular pro-Green Movement blogger Kamangir acknowledged the game in a post he published on 30 March 2008. The post, which generated 58 comments, began with the following anecdote,

*"Last night I was having a discussion with a close friend ... at the end of the conversation he summed everything up beautifully in one phrase. He said, 'We Iranians hate two things, firstly, racism, secondly, Arabs' ... Well, in terms of my sexuality, I'm 'straight', and I don't drink alcohol, and there is absolutely no religious reason behind this. But this doesn't mean that I should excommunicate everyone who doesn't fit within the narrow framework of my own beliefs"*²¹

²¹ Kamangir's blog post, entitled "What's your opinion about people being queer, in terms of sexuality? – A web-log game", is available from <http://persian.kamangir.net/index.php?s=5pesar>

// Kamangir continued, "This said, with the permission of my dear friend I would like to invite my readers to a more general game, which is called 'What is your opinion about being sexually queer?'" Kamangir then invited people to partake in the discussion by 'tagging' them in his post. He offered a disclaimer saying, "I haven't invited some of my friends because I'm worried that writing about this subject might be problematic for them".

Readers published a diverse range of comments to Kamangir's post. On 30 March 2008 Soroush said, *"I really think more people should write about these things in their blogs"*. Reza Pesar (on behalf of the 5pesar blog) said, *"Even though changing the rules of the game isn't really appropriate, I'd like to say thanks for your reply"*. But Kamangir's question certainly invited some more critical responses.

"The term faggot has evolved. It became homo, then homosexual and now queer. It would be easier to understand if these people were simply attracted to the same gender, but what's interesting is that some of these dear people like both the opposite gender and the same gender [are bi-sexual]. In Arsham's [Parsi] own words on the BBC show, queer is a lifestyle. And this lifestyle kills me. (I'm still willing to discuss how a society should have the right to ban queers the same way they can justify banning drugs)"

Kamangir replied, *"Sorry, what is the problem with somebody liking both genders?"*, a question to which SH chose a less tactful response: *"What's wrong with having sex with a child if they consent? Or with someone who's mentally retarded?"*

// The argument disintegrated and continued for about a week before the thread went quiet. More than a year later, on 28 July 2009, Hamid posted,

"I am a gay guy from this damned city of Yazd: dry, religious and holy. I've been suffering under the heavy burden of my sexuality for years but my voice is not heard. Dear Kamangir, I don't think your activities will help my peers and I, but what is clear is that the welfare of future generations [of homosexuals] will be protected [through your endeavours]"

These quotations reveal a number of important issues. Firstly, blog readers are not afraid of being critical of homosexuality online. There are no repercussions for online homophobia and those who publish homophobic content are generally not

afraid of doing so under their real names. Compare this with gay bloggers, many of whom are so fearful they operate entirely under the cover of a pseudonym. Homophobia is prevalent both online and offline in Iranian communities and little is being done about it. In many cases homophobia is encouraged or even forgiven. Indeed and as we saw, Kamangir pandered to homophobic tendencies by pre-emptively asking for forgiveness from those who he knew the topic would offend.

Nonetheless, the converse is also worthy of note. As mentioned, LGBT Iranians cherish any public support, especially from gay-friendly heterosexual Iranians. When Hamid said to Kamangir that his post would affect the lives of future generations, he was speaking more generally about support for the LGBT community from individuals and organisations outside the community itself.

// At the end of this report we make a number of recommendations, most of which focus on raising the visibility of the LGBT community and empowering them. We also recommend that liberal Iranians proactively support their LGBT community and strive to create supportive environments in which their friends will feel comfortable coming out. Online homophobia is both repressive and aggressive and we analyse how it affects LGBT Iranians in the next section.

HOMOPHOBIA ONLINE

4.2

// In an e-mail interview with Small Media, '5pesar' blog author Amir defined homophobia as "a fear of homosexuals". Amir also expressed the opinion that somebody who fears homosexuality might not necessarily be 'anti' homosexual and used a slightly inappropriate example to explain what he meant,

"I am against Judaism, but I am not afraid of it, because at the moment Jews cannot impact upon my life. But I am an Islamophobe because, unlike Judaism, Islam is tied in with my inner emotions and it causes my inner feelings to deeply oscillate, so I can say I'm an Islamophobe"

The logical extension of Amir's argument is that those who are against homosexuality are not necessarily homophobic; their dislike of homosexuality might not stem from fear. This misunderstanding of the concept of homophobia shows how detrimental the lack of open forums for communicating about LGBT issues can be. In spite of what Amir believes homophobia cannot be characterised so simply. In addition to irrational fear, homophobia's definition has expanded to include a range of negative attitudes, such as contempt, prejudice and aversion.

According to an anonymous article published on BBC Persian in support of raising awareness for the International Day Against Homophobia 2008, the social taboos surrounding homosexuality and the LGBT communities in Iran is extremely detrimental.²²

²² http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2008/05/080517_ag-against-homophobia-day.shtml

“A lack of information, and more importantly the fear of talking about social phenomena results in negligent people and negligent experts. Today, in Iran, there is a total taboo on homosexuality, either in rejecting it or accepting it, in the official media. Scientific societies have strengthened homophobia in Iran and any judgemental conclusions about this phenomenon have led to further speculation”

The author of Nejabat weblog aligns their definition of homophobia with a more commonplace understanding of the term,²³

²³ <http://nejabat.wordpress.com/2010/01/07/29/>

“[Homophobia is] anger and hatred toward homosexuals, avoidance of homosexuals, considering same-sex orientation to be worthless and invalid, fear of homosexuals, prejudice and bigotry toward homosexuals, reluctance to obtain accurate and scientific knowledge about homosexuality and insistence on ingrained biases”

While most homophobic content online appears in the comments posted to gay or gay friendly blogs posts and articles, there are a few intentionally and exclusively homophobic and anti-gay blogs and websites (one of which will be discussed in the section concerning homosexuality and Islam). In addition, it is very uncommon for anyone to take a stand against homophobic content when it appears in the Persian language in the public domain.

A very specific example of homophobia in the public domain occurred during an episode of Befarmaeed Sham, a franchised Iranian version of Come Dine With Me, which screens weekly on popular Persian-language satellite channel Manoto TV. The conversations that take place around the dinner table provide a perfect window into the diverse mind-sets of Iranians

in diaspora. The Group 36 Befarmaeed Sham diners reflected on gay marriage in Episode 1 and revealed the level of discomfort many Iranians feel when discussing socio-culturally taboo subjects with others.²⁴

²⁴ *The video for Group 36, Episode 1 of Befarmaeed Sham, which aired in December, has been watched more than 30,000 times on YouTube. At the time of writing 456 people had 'liked' the clip <https://www.facebook.com/manototv/posts/137780402998261>*

// Group 36 of Befarmaeed Sham comprised three women and a man. Halfway through the dinner the man started a conversation about gay marriage, arguing that it is not 'natural' for same-sex couples to marry. The first woman stated that homosexuals 'become' gay after suffering bad experiences with the opposite gender. The second woman said that, in her opinion, homosexuality is an illness. The man interjected and agreed that yes, homosexuality can be construed as an illness. The third woman argued that homosexuality is not really a disease, at least not like cancer, because it is something you are born with. In her opinion, being gay is more like being deaf or blind. After a bit of debate, all of the dinner guests agreed that homosexuality is not like cancer, which has the potential to be cured, but a syndrome you are born with.

Manoto has a broad-reaching audience both inside and outside Iran. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Manoto is the most popular satellite channel broadcasting in the Persian language into Iran. The commentary on social media following the broadcast of this particular episode of Befarmaeed Sham was overwhelmingly critical. Zeytoon, a famous Iranian blogger who has written a number of posts in support of the freedom of homosexuals, posted a clip of the conversation on his Facebook page and commented,

"Just five minutes of Befarmaeed Sham, where the participants make some brilliant and scientific comments about gay marriage. If I was the show's producer, I would have stopped their conversation, made them cook again and forced them to dine in silence as punishment"

Taha Baziri replied, *“How interesting, these guys have actually lived abroad for years ... why is it that some people can never attain humanity?”* Mitra Nichiri added, *“Why would a wise, polite person bring such a discussion to the dinner table? They’ve lived in England ... one said ‘people are born blind, dumb or gay’, and that was actually the ‘intellectual’ one”*. Javid Jay Bakht replied, *“The blonde woman [woman 3] is slightly informed, but the rest are shameful and embarrassing. I’m so happy I don’t know these brainless idiots”*. Sepideh S. Sommer commented, *“One of my good Iranian friends married a same-sex partner. They were very afraid of coming out to me, but I said to them that it’s none of my business who they choose to sleep with ... The only sexual relationship that should be punished is paedophilia”*.

// Zeytoon’s post encouraged Ashkan, a social activist, to post the video on his own Facebook profile. He said, *“Please watch this video. I’m really appalled that Manoto TV broadcast this crap during its most popular programme”*. When we asked our Facebook group respondents what they thought about the episode, they said that they had all posted their critical commentary on the comment thread beneath the episode on the official Manoto Facebook page. However, when we went to collate their comments to reference in this report, we found they had all been deleted from the page by a Manoto moderator.

One person taking a stand against homophobia and encouraging greater visibility for Iran’s LGBT communities is diaspora-based pop singer Shohreh, who was the best friend of Iran’s beloved Fereidoon Farrokhzad (1938-1992), an openly gay singer. Shohreh published a statement in support of homosexuals and LGBT Iranians on the Radio Zamaneh website.²⁵ Radio Zamaneh’s website, which includes a page dedicated to LGBT issues called Degarbash (Queer), is a unique stronghold of support for the LGBT community. The idea for the page was conceived of inside Iran, even though the site is maintained

²⁵ <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/society/degarbash/2012/02/10/10934>

from outside the country. Degarbash is one of Radio Zamaneh's most-read pages. It has been moderated by activist Saghi Ghahraman since its launch and, in personal communication with Small Media, she advised, *"The page's content was also outlined in such a way that it would have a presence in mainstream media, to have a better chance to reach the general public and influence parents and friends of the LGBT"*.

Shohreh's statement on Degarbash was directly targeted at the families of LGBT Iranians. She explained, *"From my point of view, homosexuality is a natural emotion/sexual desire, like heterosexuality and bisexuality, the only difference being that it is not as widely known in society as heterosexuality is"*. In response to a mother who recently found out her child is gay Shohreh said,

"I want to say to this mother, and to all of the mothers in the world, that we really have to pay attention to our children, and this doesn't mean that we should try and change things based on our own perspectives of what is right or what is good. If we really want to be friends with our kids then we need to find out what homosexuality really means and listen very carefully to what our children have to say. Try to get correct information about this subject and accept the outcome of that with love. At the very least, we must understand that homosexuals are born this way"

Omid responded to Shohreh's progressive article saying,

"Real artists know that today's generation, especially the young, are appreciative of the value of such important things. Given the deplorable state of Iranian society today, famous people, especially artists, are very important. I hope more people who understand this concept become proactive. There is no doubt that such actions would make them more popular"

One guest commented, *“Better late than never. Finally an artist has put their best foot forward and I’m really grateful. This is called true courage. What are the rest of [Iran’s] artists waiting for?”* Yusef replied,

“In the past I wasn’t really a fan of hers [Shohreh] ... but now that she has supported us with this action and will hopefully do so more in the future, I’m going to seriously reconsider my stance. I hope that this forces the Iranian people to emotionally reconsider their traditional feelings”

Nonetheless, some of our respondents were not so sure that traditional feelings were entirely to blame for the prevalence of homophobia in Iran. We asked our respondents whether homophobia was worse before or after the Iranian Revolution and Saghi Ghahraman poignantly replied,

“Homophobia is, without a doubt, absolutely worse now. Before the revolution, homophobia wasn’t on the surface and it could be gently brushed away. It was brushed away by those who had the means to do so such as artists, writers, the intellectual community, and even men and women who were rich or had strong characters practiced their sexual orientation freely, to a certain degree.

It was after the 1979 revolution that a witch-hunt for gay, lesbian and transsexuals began. And, for a short while, there was no distinction between transsexuals and homosexuals and both groups were hanged/killed. During the years after the revolution, with all the frenzy over homosexuality in Sharia and in the new laws, Iranian society took to being horrified by the idea of having a homosexual or transsexual family member. I have a strong feeling that most of the harsh feelings toward homosexuals and transsexuals are because of the fear of being associated with them and sharing their fate. The authorities expect parents, relatives, and friends to punish homosexual members of their own family under Sharia law.

Because honestly, society is made up of the same people now as it was a year before the revolution, and if people were so intrinsically homophobic, they would have murdered homosexuals then too, but they didn't. They turned a blind eye to them then. I blame the law and Sharia and the expectations of the authorities for this homophobia in Iran"

// Despite how we may have depicted the internet thus far, the crux of the matter is that it is not just a virtual space for activists and homophobes. It is also a space for making friends and meeting prospective partners. Because there are no night-clubs in Iran (let alone gay clubs) and cruising in public spaces is notoriously risky (albeit quite commonplace), gay Iranians have turned to the internet to find prospective dates. However, some of the real life risks have crossed over into the virtual world as well.

4.3

MANJAM: THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF ONLINE DATING

// While conducting the research for this report, Small Media discovered a YouTube video recorded and uploaded by activist Arsham Parsi, which warned of the dangers of social networking and dating site Manjam. Manjan is extremely popular with Iranians both inside and outside Iran. In the video, Parsi says that gay Iranian men inside the country had informed him of cases where members of various Iranian authority groups had used the site to entrap homosexual users, setting up dates with them only to harass and abuse them when they met.²⁶

²⁶ *Arsham Parsi's video, uploaded on 14 June 2010 is available online at >>*

[http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=-hVffEFkQcg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hVffEFkQcg)

Janet Afary, author of *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, reiterated this point in email communication with Small Media: *“The situation of Iran’s LGBT community worsened after Ahmadinejad came to power ... Internet chat rooms were set up by the state to trap gays and lesbians who responded to queries”*.

We asked our respondents if they or any of their friends had experienced entrapment online. None had experienced it first-hand. Some were adamant that it did not take place, while others were very worried about the potential risks of engaging in homosexual dating communities online. On 8 November 2011 Iran-based blogger and activist Amir responded,

“I joined Manjam about five years ago and I was very active on there. I know that every day at least thousands (if not tens of thousands) of homosexuals in Iran use this site ... Over these five years I’ve never encountered any problems, and I don’t know of anyone who has encountered such a problem. The only source of the cases that I’ve heard there was a problem for is Arsham Parsi”

Yar said, *“I never joined this site as I’ve always heard it’s not safe. One of my friends was a member but he left the site too, because he didn’t like the ambiance”*. On 19 November 2011 Siavash, a member of our Facebook group said,

“I joined Manjam about 5 or 6 years ago ... Yes, some people did have problems. The Iranian Intelligence Service is very strong ... Even though they’ve filtered the website you can still see the photos. The best thing to do is not to put your real photos online. But now everyone knows me, knows what I look like, and it’s too late for me now. Arsham is right. They arrested some guys and showed them some pictures and asked them to identify who was in the photos ... [but] in Iran, sometimes they catch onto you and sometimes they don’t”

²⁷ This quote appears on page 54 of the Human Rights Watch report “We Are a Buried Generation”, which is available for free download from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/12/15/we-are-buried-generation>

Human Rights Watch, one of the world’s leading independent organisations dedicated to defending and protecting human rights, emphasised, “[we have] not been able to confirm the methods and capabilities of the government when it comes to monitoring LGBT sites, nor [have we] secured evidence suggesting that Iran’s security forces or judiciary have engaged in a systematic campaign to target and entrap gay men and other members of Iran’s LGBT community”.²⁷ However, in six pages of first hand testimony, they narrate the stories of those who have suffered various forms of online entrapment, which shows the practice to be an extremely dangerous reality for homosexual Iranians.

In an interview with Ynet News, activist and blogger Faruh said, “Intelligence agents fix meetings with homosexuals over the net and set a trap” (Cohen 2010). Faruh worked with Human Rights Watch to send a message to all of the Iranian users of Manjam to warn them of the perceived danger, but the message does not seem to have deterred Iranians from using the service.

While the internet opens up very real possibilities for members of Iran’s minority communities, it also poses some very real risks. One of the most common ways the LGBT rights movement is suppressed is through the targeted filtering of LGBT-specific content and, in the next section, we use the story of Ketabkhaneh88 to illustrate the detrimental effect censorship, in its various forms, is having on Iran’s LGBT community.

KETABHANEH88: THE ONLINE QUEER BOOK FAIR OF IRAN

// Ketabkhaneh88, an online queer (Persian, *degarbash*) book fair supported from outside Iran by gay rights activist and lesbian poet Saghi Ghahraman, was uploaded to coincide with the opening of Tehran's International Book Fair in May 2009. The idea came from inside Iran, from a gay poet who said to Saghi, *"Alternative literature is censored by the Ministry of Culture and Guidance, but gay literature is prohibited from even being sent to the Ministry; we are non-existent, even in literature"*.

Another gay poet, who also pioneered the idea, worked with Saghi to ready the selected literature for Ketabkhaneh88. He took the first steps towards establishing a publishing company called Gilgamishan, which is exclusively for LGBT titles. Saghi's role was to support and edit the work alongside him, undertaking the tasks that were impossible for him to do from inside Iran, tasks like communicating with the publisher and registering Gilgamishan Publishing in Toronto. In an e-mail to Small Media Saghi Ghahraman said, *"I handled those parts that needed an actual person with an ID card, but the rest we owe to the gay community of Iran, and their leaders and influential figures"*.

Ketabkhaneh88's website, which was originally hosted on the Iran-based Blogfa platform, was ultimately filtered and forcibly taken down by the Iranian government. It was re-uploaded to Blogspot in July 2010, following a similar trajectory to Khaneh Honar blog, which was discussed earlier in this report.

// Blogspot is one of the many platforms completely filtered by the Iranian authorities, but tech savvy Iranian internet users access these sites easily with anti-filters and proxies and Ketabkhaneh88 has had more than 6,000 page views since it was published on Blogspot.

Khashayar Khaste, an author whose works are featured in the book fair commented, *“The aim of this project is to provide Iranian homosexual writers with the opportunity to publish their books online, because they cannot publish their work elsewhere”* (in Misaghi 2010). Blogger Rasoul Moein said of the book fair, *“I’m very happy and proud, I feel now that I exist. I would like to thank all of those who were involved [in this project] and I hope this continues”* (Moein 2009). Blogger and gay rights activist ‘5pesar’ (2009) introduced Ketabkhaneh88’s book fair in a blog post stating,

“We, the Iranian homosexuals, exist. And this existence is not just a physical presence in the towns and villages of Iran. We have a place in this society, we draw influence from it and we leave an impression on it. We ‘live’ in this society. Some of us write, compose poems and generate ideas. But people don’t read what we write because they are denied access to our work. To coincide with this year’s Tehran International Book Fair, the International Book Fair of Iranian Homosexual Authors is ready to be read on Iranian computers ... This is a step from our side towards yours. This will help us get to know each other better and to move towards a free society”

In an effort to provide an overview of the types of books being created in the underground LGBT literature community in Iran,

without burdening the reader with a content analysis, we examine the available online commentary about the work of a few of the authors who featured in the book fair under the subheadings below. We look at the work of Hamseresht (Kindred Spirit), Khashayar Khaste, Elham Malekpour and Janan Mirzadeh. Their work is inspiring and especially poignant; they literally risk all to write. In our list of recommendations at the end of the report, we suggest a framework for supporting LGBT literature, which we hope would encourage younger generations of LGBT Iranians to express themselves in books.

HAMSERESHT (KINDRED SPIRIT)

// Writing for the Iranian Queer Organisation's magazine Cheraq, lesbian poet Saghi Ghahraman described Hamseresht (Kindred Spirit) as an author who *"has sworn never to write about anything except for homosexuality in the Iranian context"* (Ghahraman 2009). Hamseresht published his first poems in blogs in March 2006 and made them available in e-book format in 2008. Iranian authors have to apply to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for permission to publish their books. It is far easier to circumvent the official application process by releasing books in electronic format and independent of a publisher, and many independent authors choose to do this, but for homosexual authors there is no alternative. Not only would the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance feel affronted by LGBT literature, society is not particularly welcoming of the prospect either.

Hamseresht attempts to counteract homophobia in his work and Ghahraman believes that the way Hamseresht deals with homophobic culture is both effective and empowering: *"His manner of mockery towards the biased heterosexual mind, worked like a remedy for those queer bloggers who were vulne-*

nable to the ruling culture ... [together they] went from being the victims of heterosexual society, into being the critics of such a society, which is not yet smart enough to yield to a just and fair system" (Ghahraman 2009).

// Blogger Mahi also expressed admiration for Hamseresht: "He is the perfect role model for Iranian homosexuals and the name that he has chosen emphasises his extreme talent ... He talks about a kind of kindred spirit that exists within homosexuals. He is a kindred spirit writing for kindred spirits ... he screams the pain of the kindred spirits and talks of the limitations of 'existence' for homosexuals in Iran" (Mahi 2011). Gilgamish also wrote of Hamseresht's effect on bloggers: "Hamseresht has affected change on bloggers; a change in form and in the amount and type of words used, regardless of the content and the presentation, a new form and format for the expression of poetry" (Gilgamish 2007).

ELHAM MALEKPOUR

// Most of the online commentary concerning Elham Malekpour's books discusses the vagueness of her poetry. Ahmad Bahador commented, "What is the point in writing a poem that nobody understands except the poet themselves? ... I'm not against the writing of such poems, I even appreciate it, but I am strongly against the sharing and publishing of them".²⁸

²⁸ These blog comments are available at the *Queer Book Fair of Iran* blog on Blogspot. See <http://ketabkhaneh88.blogspot.com/2010/10/blog-post.html>

Another of Elham's readers, also male, had a similar feeling when he first read her poetry but later changed his mind. His observations were published in the blog of the Queer Book Fair: "I downloaded some books from the Queer Book Fair ... and two of those books were written by Elham Malekpour ... I started reading them but didn't understand much ... and then today something really interesting happened!" The reader then goes on to describe how he met her by chance through a common

friend, and how this chance meeting completely altered his perspective: “*Elham, now I can understand those words which you vitalise by blowing your spirit into them ... I feel it ... I understand it*” (Unknown Author 2010).

Mahi was impressed by the fact that one of Malekpour’s books, *Jamaica is Also a Country*, had successfully gained a publishing permit from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This permission was probably granted because the book’s multiple meanings are extremely veiled and, as the above testimonies highlight, are not easily understood, even by the target audience. In this book, Malekpour “*puts forward the image of a young poet who doesn’t want to stay confined by the usual format of text ... and this attempt at escape ... has led to incomplete images that sometimes come in order and sometimes follow no logical relation to each other*” (Mahi 2011).

JANAN MIRZADEH

// In a review for Radio Zamaneh, Morteza Sh refers to Janan Mirzadeh’s book *Pirhan-e Rangrazan* as being the first Persian homosexual novel (Sh, 2010). He goes on to say that by homosexual he doesn’t mean that the book is about homosexuality: “*Like any other novel [Pirhan-e Rangrazan] is about humans, human relationships and mental and emotional challenges, or in one word it is about life; but from a homosexual perspective*” (Sh 2010). An interesting point that Sh makes about Iranian readers is that they tend to consider the characteristics of the author and of the main character to be one and the same. Sh claims, “*This approach gives a more concrete image of a homosexual’s life and helps the unfamiliar reader to better understand homosexuality*”.

Although Sh believes that censorship and suppression in Iran have always limited homosexual artists, forcing them to rely on metaphor and allusion, he also feels that Janan Mirzadeh has moved beyond this. He explains that Mirzadeh is trying to introduce the reader to the transition from tradition to modernity, a point of conflict in Iran's very traditional society: "*Once the Iranian homosexual has accepted his sexual identity he can no longer return to the world of sheikhs and shaheds, even if he wants to*" (Sh, 2010).

KHASHAYAR KHAJESTEH

// Mahi argues that Khashayar Khajesteh's *Ghahvehkhaneh* (Coffeeshop) is a literary work of genius: "*The shocking news about acts of sexual violence, rape and other social pathologies that we read of in Ghahvehkhaneh form are expressed in a story format that affects the reader better than any news or reports*" (Mahi 2011). On a blog post in which an interview between Daftar-e Khak and Soghi Ghahraman was published, reader Kasra commented, "*In his [Khashayar Khajesteh's] works there is a tangible sense of fear, caution and resistance, which is understandable, but you can tell he has created a sense of balance in his life*" (Kasra 2010).

Figure 3 "This weblog has been removed on orders of the committee determining instances of criminal content. For further information concerning the reasons for its filtering and removal please contact filter@dcf.ir"

این وبلاگ به دستور کارگروه تعیین مصادیق محتوای مجرمانه مسدود شده است
جهت اطلاع از دلایل مسدود سازی و رفع آن لطفاً با ایمیل filter@dcf.ir تماس بگیرید

[BLOGFA.COM]

// Although the Iranian government's internet filtering regime affects many websites (see Figure 3), the Queer Book Fair of Iran, which was forcibly removed from its Iran-based server, provides a perfect example of how the LGBT community

is constantly engaged in a battle of repression and resistance against the government and authorities. The advantage of using an Iran-based blog host is that they provide valuable support in using the Persian script, but the disadvantage is that the Iranian government has full control over the content and periodically removes anything they deem questionable or against the Computer Crimes Law. Chapter 4, Article 14 of the Computer Crimes Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran states,

“Whoever uses computer systems, telecommunications systems or data carriers to publish or distribute immoral content, or produces or stores them with the intention of corrupting the society, will be sentenced to imprisonment for between 91 days to 2 years or will be fined between 5,000,000 and 40,000,000 Iranian Rials or both ... Immoral content consists of images, sounds or texts, either realistic or unrealistic, that demonstrate complete nudity or men or women or show their genitals or shows sexual acts between humans. (Article 15) If one stimulates or encourages access to immoral content or facilitates access to this content they will be sentenced to imprisonment (91 days to 1 year) or sentenced to pay a fine (5,000,000 to 20,000,000 Iranian Rials) or both”

London-based free speech organisation Article19 is extremely critical of Iran’s Computer Crimes Law (2012), and considers the wording to be particularly vague and the punishments unnecessarily strict,

“[Article 14] broadly restricts expression according to its content. The availability of the death penalty for this offense indicates the determination of the Iranian Government to suppress expression that it considers undesirable and makes Article 14 the most problematic provision in the Computer Crimes Law ... terms such as ‘immoral’ and ‘pornographic’ are impermissibly vague”

// Websites hosted within Iran are subject to the control policies of Data Communications of Iran and they can be removed without warning. Although harsher punishments are rare, the Computer Crimes Law does make provisions for them. Software developer Saeed Malekpour, whose software was used (unbeknownst to him) in the back-end construction of a pornographic website, was recently sentenced to death by the Iranian government. One young Iranian we spoke with said,

“One day I logged on to Persian Blog to post something and it was just gone. Everything was gone. All of my files. All of my data. No warning or anything. And it wasn’t like I changed the content. It was just that it was growing in readership. Sure, it wasn’t exactly legal according to the laws of the Islamic Republic but it wasn’t hurting anyone”

// Exactly how is it that the Islamic Republic justifies its regime of censorship and repression against Iran’s sexual minorities? We must remember that Iran’s conservative forces are also online and that they are an extremely valuable source of information. Researchers frequently focus exclusively on what liberal Iranians publish online without recognising the converse. The Iranian government encourages conservative bloggers to create content and religious scholars receive stipends for blogging and financial support for their blogs. From websites claiming to be able to ‘cure’ gays, to religious scholars speaking out against homosexuality in their blogs, the ‘conservative’ internet is an important source of data on homophobia and is representative of the intolerance of sexual diversity in the Iranian context.

// In the next section, we look at what the Koran says about homosexuality and at what Iran’s religious scholars believe the Koran says about homosexuality. Through an analysis of comments posted to their blogs and/or other blog posts published in response to their articles and analyses, we investigate the feedback from both their supporters and their critics.

ISLAM, THE KORAN AND HOMOSEXUALITY ONLINE

4.5

// Most of the debates about Islam and homosexuality rely on the verses of the Koran that describe the story of the people of Lot. For those unfamiliar with the story, we have condensed it here for convenience.

The prophet Lot left Egypt and headed to the city of Sodom in Palestine. According to the Koran this city was filled with evil. Their men slept with men instead of women and this is where the word sodomy comes from. Allah revealed to the Prophet Lot that he should tell his people to stop this behaviour, but they would not listen. He struggled against the citizens of Sodom for a number of years, trying to get them to change their ways, but they were sceptical and said to him that he should bring Allah's punishment upon them if he was telling the truth.

Overwhelmed with despair, Lot prayed to Allah to make him victorious and destroy the corrupt. Allah sent three angels disguised as handsome young men to Sodom to answer Lot's prayer. Lot's daughter was the first to catch sight of them at the well and they asked her if there was anywhere for them to rest. She rushed home and sent her father to the well. Lot spoke with the angels and tried to convince them to stay elsewhere. When darkness shrouded the town, he escorted his guests home.

Nobody knew they were there, but Lot's wife slipped out of the house and told the town's inhabitants. They formed a mob and surged towards Lot's house. He pleaded with them to leave him alone but they became very angry and broke down the door. He was overwhelmed by fear for his guests at this point, but they said to him, "Don't worry, we are angels and these people cannot hurt you". Upon hearing this, the mob fled from Lot's house, hurling threats as they left. The angels warned Lot to leave his house before sunrise and to take all of his family with him

except for his wife. Allah decreed that Sodom should perish and an earthquake decimated the town. A storm of stones rained down on the city and everyone and everything was destroyed, including Lot's wife.

Verse 55 of Al-Naml says, "Do you approach men with desire instead of women? Then you are an ignorant people". Verses 80 and 81 of Al-A'raf claim, "And [we had sent] Lot when he said to his people, 'Do you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds' ... Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people". Verses 26:165–166 of Ash-Shu'ara ask, "Do you approach males among the worlds. And leave what your Lord has created for you as mates? Then you are a people transgressing".²⁹ // The extremely dissimilar interpretations of such verses have spurred debate among religious scholars and we attempt to reflect the diversity of the interpretations that we discovered online while conducting our research in the subsequent text.

²⁹ *The Arabic verses and their translations are available at <http://quran.com>*

SEYYED MOHAMMAD TABATABAEI

// Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabaei, also known as Allmah Tabatabaei, is the author of Tafsir Almizan, an exegesis of the Koran. Tabatabaei is one of many religious scholars who believe that homosexuality is against both the Koran and Islam. In his interpretation of Verse 80 of Al-A'raf, Tabatabaei says,

"If you look carefully at how humans have been created, there are two physical forms, male and female, and they have each been given different implements ... therefore a male,

which we call man, is created for a female not for another male, and a female is not created for another female ... there is a natural pairing ... human nature and man's creation means that men need to marry women, not men. And it also leads women to marry men, not a woman ... marriage is based on reproduction needs and not on partnership for life"

³⁰ *Ghome-loot weblog* is available at <http://www.ghome-loot2.blogfa.com> The author of Ghome-Loot blog supports Tabatabaei's views.³⁰ In Ghome-Loot, which translates to The People of Lot, the author writes, "This blog is merely a warning for those who want to repeat the mistake that the people of Lot made". His blog is headed with the phrase, "Through starting this blog I aim to stop the virus of homosexuality one day. I am looking forward to that day". He continues, "There isn't any worse diversion from the natural order than neglecting reproduction, which is male and female mating, and God has given that to humans, it's an instinct".

On 4 April 2010 Ehsan commented, "I don't know why I get scared whenever I visit your blog, every time more than the previous time, but I'm serious, your blog is truly a warning". On 24 May 2010 blog reader Esmaeil posted the comment, "Thanks for your meaningful blog. I will try to invite those who are interested in this sin to see this blog". On 8 July 2010 Saeed posted, "I hope it's ok but I used your words for our [mosque's] cultural activities".

AKBAR GANJI

// Journalist and political activist Akbar Ganji disagrees with Tabatabaei's interpretation of the Koran: "Tabatabaei says that the penis makes a man a man, and that this has been created for women. This means that female genitalia make women who they are and means they have been created for men. According

to Tabatabaei, the lust of men is active and women's lust is passive ... and from these irrational arguments he concludes that heterosexuality is natural and innate and homosexuality is abnormal and against human nature ... assuming natural matters could be distinguished from unnatural ones ... is it possible to say whatever is 'natural' is good and ethical and whatever is 'unnatural' is bad and immoral?"³¹ Ganji considers this kind of reasoning to be a 'natural fallacy'.

³¹ http://zamaaneh.com/idea/2008/06/print_post_327.html

On 27 June 2008 'Ensanam Arezoost' posted a comment on Radio Zamaaneh's website about Ganji's article: "*I can only congratulate Mr. Ganji for his human behaviour towards the right of others to live*". MM also commented on this post: "*Homosexuality is a complicated syndrome of physiological and biological disorders of the human body, and it cannot be evaluated just from a 'beliefs' point of view. It can't even be called a disease, although it treads the line of being one ... But whatever it is, it exists and it can't be ignored. This unfortunate and unconventional phenomenon could be minimised by a long-term programme, but their rights can't be ignored and we should try to encourage the society to look at this issue from a scientific point of view instead of a beliefs point of view*".

MOHSEN KADIVAR

// Azadeh Sepehri's blog post, called "Mohsen Kadivar's Defence of the Maximum Punishment for Homosexuals", quotes from Kadivar, a 'religious intellectual'. Kadivar's argument is that "sexual relations with the same sex are strongly condemned in all Abrahamic religions, including Islam. The Holy Koran has reprehended homosexuality with the strongest possible tone ... Islamic scholars, both Sunni and Shia, believe in the religious prohibition of homosexuality and in a maximum punishment for it".

³² <http://5pesar.wordpress.com/2011/04/03/pars11-04-01/>

Kadivar's perspective also caused other Iranian bloggers to reflect on the relationship between Islam and homosexuality. Many bloggers re-posted his words to their own blogs and wrote their own commentaries and analyses. Blogger 5pesar framed Kadivar's words with the title, "*Fraudulent priest defends maximum punishment for homosexuality*".³² Azadeh Sepehri wrote in her article, "*Kadivar's comments about homosexuality reinforce that religion is fundamentally in conflict with intellectuality and that there can never be such thing as a 'religious intellectual'*".

ARASH NARAGHI

³³ <http://www.arashnaraghi.org/articles/Islamandminorities.htm>

// Arash Naraghi, Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Moravian College goes so far as to argue that homosexuality is not against the Koran. Going against the grain of Tabatabaei's and Kadivar's opinion, Naraghi argues that in the Koran there is no explicit signification that denies homosexuality.³³ What the Koran explicitly prohibits is the indecent act that the people of Lot committed. Naraghi propagates a serious doubt that this '*indecent act*' that the people of Lot were punished for is what we refer to as homosexuality today. He believes that one needs to refer to a collection of Koranic evidence in order to delineate what this specific indecent act was. Naraghi argues that God's punishment for the people of Lot was for several bad things that they had done: "*According to the Koran, they were highway robbers ... and there is only one place in the Koran that goes into more detail about the kind of homosexual behaviour that was condemned. It is when the people of Lot came rushing towards his house to force his handsome young guests to have sex with them. This aggressive violent behaviour, above all else, makes it clear that they went there with the intention to rape, and this is condemn-able by any moral standards*".

// Online, Iranians reacted in a number of different ways to Naraghi's arguments about the relationship between homosexuality and the Koran. For example, on 16 September 2010 Nima commented on an interview Naraghi did with Radio Farda saying, *"Mr. Naraghi! ... For me, who has not been able to express my true feelings to the one I love for years, and have believed in Islam and wisdom, your words are hope in the darkness. In my lifetime, I probably won't get married to the one I love and adopt a child, but I will strive to change society's view about this matter"*.³⁴ Nevertheless, not all of those who posted comments agreed with Naraghi. On 16 September 2010 Saeed said, *"Nobody is born homosexual and, more importantly, unlike animals, humans can control their desires ... this is what has established civilization"*. Later that day, Irandoost quoted Verse 165 of Ash-Shu'ara and said, *"The story of the people of Lot is clear and it cannot be ignored"*.

³⁴ http://www.radiofarda.com/content/o2_arash_naraghi_responses_to_web_readers/2158664.html

In order to prove the point that homosexuality is not necessarily the *'indecent act'* of the people of Lot, Naraghi argues that the Koran doesn't say anything about women's homosexuality: *"If sexual contact between two persons of the same sex is impermissible only because it is sex between two people of the same sex, then sexual contact between two women must be as bad as sexual contact between two men"*. // Not only is lesbianism not described in the verses generally used to prohibit homosexuality from an Islamic perspective, lesbianism is also underrepresented in Iran's online community and lesbians are generally less visible in society than gay men. Therefore, the next section strives to outline why this is the case.

4.6

WHY ARE LESBIANS LESS ACTIVE ONLINE THAN GAY MEN?

// Over the course of our research, we realised that those who were most active online were gay males. Despite our best attempts at attaining diversity within our Facebook group, we had only one bisexual group member and no transgender members. Therefore, we asked our group members why they thought that lesbians were less active in the group and their responses pressed us to ask others the same question. Facebook group member, Vahi, suggested that there must be fewer lesbians than gay males, but Pari disagreed,

“No, I don’t believe that there are fewer of us. It’s just that we don’t like to get involved. Recently I was talking to a friend who said, ‘Don’t worry about it [seeking awareness and rights for lesbians] so much Pari, we’re all just living our own lives’. This is the problem. This is who we are”

Facebook group member Rey suggested, *“I think the reason lesbians are less visible is that many lesbians don’t even know themselves very well and they often end up married to men. This was about to happen for me too”*. When we opened up our line of questioning to other activists and Iranian LGBT community members, Arsham Parsi told us, *“Women, in general, have more problems in Iran. There is also a little bit of a moral issue that makes it harder for them to be active. Lesbians are too proud, especially those who want to be tough and masculine, so they withdraw from society”*. Arsham articulated a more elaborate response to the same question in an interview with poet and writer Mahnaz Salami,

“In the beginning, there were no lesbians in our group [Iranian Queer Organization], and, unfortunately, there are still very few. Contrary to lesbians in Western societies, Iranian lesbians participate very little in the queer movement. This can be traced back to the condition of women in Iran ... Unfortunately, being a woman in Iran is not easy and being a lesbian is even worse, because not only are you a woman, but you are also gay. Women in Iran who adhere to the patriarchal culture are not small in number ... [many] women condemn sex discrimination, but when they are confronted with lesbianism, they themselves discriminate based on sexual orientation”³⁵

³⁵ <http://www.gozaar.org/english/interview-en/Unveiling-the-Iranian-Queer-Organization.html> Iranian lesbian activist and poet, Saghi Ghahraman, responded, “We started our activism nearly two decades after gay men and we haven’t recognised a desire to be cohesive and active in society so far. One reason is religion and the other is the Iranian women’s movement ... I think a community for young lesbians should be established to encourage them in social activities”. Many of our respondents argued that the Iranian women’s movement is detrimental to lesbian rights because it focuses on women’s interests as a whole and it does not protect lesbians. Many lesbian activists who join the women’s movement are practically forced back into the closet in order to campaign for women’s rights as a whole. They are discouraged from being open about their sexuality, as this would bring added controversy to the already contentious issue of women’s rights.

Iran-based activist blogger, Amir Hamjensgara said,

“I think the reason [that lesbians aren’t as active as gay men] is that being a woman in Iran is basically a crime. They have more limitations ... Some issues are beyond the reach of the homosexual community and these are macro issues. For example, issues such as the equality of men and women, women’s freedom and the independence of women should be solved by a majority society ... When women feel empowered, their participation in society increases ... I even believe that physical power can be effective. Physical strength increases self-confidence and audacity. In our society, when a woman makes herself visible in public, she is construed as a sexual subject, even by other women. One of the reasons that people have this approach is because they feel that other women won’t support them”

// Lesbian Girl, a contributor to Tizbin blog, had a very different opinion about why lesbians are less active in the online LGBT rights movement. She argued,

“Gay men are usually totally gay, but a majority of lesbians are either not actually lesbian, or are bisexual ... I’m bisexual. This is what I finally decided to call myself. For a long time, I didn’t know whether or not I was a homosexual and finally, for my own peace of mind, I chose to call myself bisexual. I accepted it as my identity ... When I first came into the homo-sexual society I met some lesbians (only a couple of whom were really actually lesbian) and they were all pretty conservative. They found each other through wearing the rainbow sign. All except for one of them agreed they had become interested in women because of the problems they’d endured with their husbands or boyfriends. They had turned to women because they were ‘damaged’ ... I think there are more lesbians (probably not real ones though) than there are gay men, but we’re far more insecure”

Pari, a member of our Facebook group, says that lesbians hide themselves for fear of being further ostracised by society,

“We [lesbians] keep everything inside. There are many people who don’t know anything about us, because we don’t really want them to know. We avoid talking about ourselves. Maybe because we’re afraid of being harassed. I don’t mean sexual harassment, I mean harassment because of our rights and beliefs ... Most lesbians are very serious and just come out of their shell when they are among other lesbians. This could be because they fear society and men, but another reason could be that we take our lives very seriously. We focus more on daily routine and we strive to be independent in life. Especially to be independent of men ... Women, let alone lesbians, don’t have any rights in Iran. This is because Iran is a patriarchal society. When thinking about lesbians, the first thing that comes to people’s minds is porn movies, that’s their mentality about lesbians, and that’s why we prefer to be with ourselves, with our friends ... I don’t actually agree that gay men have more places to go and meet other men than lesbians do. You just have to be part of the community to know what’s going on. Gay men might go to cruise at a park, but lesbians meet in home parties, coffee shops and parks. There is always someone new coming, someone new who can be trusted. It’s like a little mafia. I remember when I was in Iran, I was careful even when I was chatting, and in parties, we tried not to be too loud. Someone, older and more experienced than us was responsible for adding new people to the community”

BISEXUALITY: A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC

4.7

// Although Lesbian Girl was comfortable coming out as bisexual, a number of lesbian, gay and transgender Iranians are not accepting of bisexuality. On 17 March 2012 a debate took place on the wall of Small Media's secret LGBT Facebook group page about the call to eliminate 'bisexuality' from LGBT. Amir Hamjensgara had shared a blog post he had written on the topic asking,³⁶

³⁶ See <http://www.hamjensgara.com/article/a-22.html>

"Can those who say bisexuals should be eliminated from the LGBT community, and we should become LGTs instead, prove that they are not bisexual themselves? Who will determine who is bisexual and who is not? ... One thing is clear: sexual orientation towards the same sex is part of a bisexual's sexual orientation ... if a bisexual man or woman is attracted to someone from the same sex, what is the difference between him/her and a homosexual? ... When you make bisexuality a taboo, and marginalise them, the natural reaction is for bisexuals to keep their sexuality secret and do you realise how harmful this could be? Putting pressure on bisexuals to get them to call themselves homosexual or to exclude them from homosexual society if they can't will create a phenomenon called 'ex-gay', which will harm the theoretical and political-social prestige of our society and bring us disrepute"

// Group member Yar considered this movement to be an "absolute conspiracy", but Arash defended the call to ostracise bisexuals: "We'd be well pleased if bisexuals could figure themselves out soon and determine their path. I really don't understand why some people get so stressed when we say bisexuals

should be eliminated from our minority and join the heterosexual majority". Yar responded, "Dear friends, I regret to inform you that some people are trying to forge a gap in the LGBT community. Their first step is to eliminate bisexuals from the term LGBT ... I hope everyone reacts to this sensitive issue. Hidden hands are darting out of sleeves to force a large canyon between us". Arash believed that Yar was overreacting: "The way you're talking, it's as though they're wanted to eliminate someone from the earth ... You're oversensitive". Yar rebutted, "When it comes to eliminating my bisexual friend [from the LGBT community], there is no time to waste".

One of the major issues facing Iran's LGBT community is the social vacuum created by a lack of space for discussion and community building; misinformation is rife and cohesion is severely lacking. As we heard earlier, many LGBT Iranians feel completely ostracised by their society and, as will be revealed through the case studies in the next section, they also have major issues with trusting even those closest to them with their true identities.

the 1990s, the number of cases of acute myocardial infarction (AMI) in the Netherlands has increased by 50% (1).

AMI is a complex disease with a multifactorial aetiology. The most important risk factors for AMI are smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolaemia, diabetes mellitus, obesity, physical inactivity, and a family history of AMI (2). The pathogenesis of AMI is still unclear, but it is generally accepted that atherosclerosis is the main underlying mechanism (3).

The pathogenesis of atherosclerosis is a complex process involving the interaction of genetic and environmental factors. The most important genetic factors are hypercholesterolaemia, hypertension, and diabetes mellitus. The most important environmental factors are smoking, physical inactivity, and a diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol (4).

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CASE STUDIES

// In this section, we introduce you to the diverse group of LGBT Iranians who informed our analysis. From the very start, we set about developing research methods that would help us interact with LGBT Iranians online. This was crucial as we ventured toward learning how they use global communications technologies to express themselves and build their communities online. We used social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to locate LGBT Iranians who were willing to work with us on our project. FriendFeed, a social networking platform popular with IT-savvy Iranians, and personal blogs also provided a wealth of information.

Before we established the secret Facebook group that would become our focus group, we came across a number of Facebook groups for Iranian lesbians that had been infiltrated by young men posing as lesbians. In witnessing this, we quickly realised that any core group of LGBT Iranians who were living inside Iran and were active on Facebook were going to be difficult to find because they would be behind a wall of security and anonymity. Our team spent one day approaching every LGBT member of every relevant public Facebook group that we could

find with an invitation to participate in our research. Of more than 100 requests sent, none came back with an affirmative answer. It became obvious that we would have to change our recruiting procedure.

// Hypothesising that there must be hidden Facebook groups beyond our reach, we decided to start from the bottom and work our way up by creating our own. We established a secret Facebook group, which we called *Goftegooye Khodemooni* (Our Chat). After adding a core group of five LGBT Iranians who we knew through our own social networks, we asked them to invite their LGBT friends to the group. The group was thus built through the snowball technique, which subsequently established a foundation of trust for our members since the member who added them had already verified their position in the community. Although *Goftegooye Khodemooni*'s membership fluctuated, throughout most of the formal research period, the group generally comprised approximately 34 members including the three researchers. Group members were a mix of lesbian, gay and bisexual Iranians, with gay Iranian males representing the majority.

5.1

FACEBOOK GROUP: GOFTEGOOYE KHODEMOONI

// We encouraged our group members to share only as much information as they felt comfortable sharing. In addition, we designed a document that explained who we were, the goals of our research, and advised our participants that while we would be using their quotes in our publication, we would ensure that their anonymity was maintained. Group members participated to varying degrees. In some cases, members simply lurked in the background, liking intermittent updates, but generally remaining quiet. Others were more active. It was clear that those who were active in the group tended to be the ones who were more active and visible in the wider LGBT community as well.

// The names used below are pseudonyms and any identifying information has been altered to protect the privacy of the participants in our research. Before analysing some of the main discussion points broached by the group, we allow a cross-section of the group members to introduce themselves in the text below.

It is of note that no transgender Iranians took part in our discussions on Facebook. As mentioned, Iran's LGBT community is very segregated. Although we spoke with transgender Iranians while conducting our questionnaires and surveys, the Facebook group was comprised primarily of gay men and a few lesbian women. Under the categories below, we introduce the group members who actively took part in our research.

As each member joined the group, we requested that they introduce themselves to the other group members. Here they introduce themselves in their own words. Not everyone took part in the introductory exercise, but the personal statements below accurately represent a cross-section of our group members.

MALE GROUP MEMBERS

“I’m Anzi, 22 years old, and I’m very happy that I am homosexual ... I love myself and I have many friends. Everyone says I’m too happy! ... I’ve tried to talk with my friends about who I am, and to some extent I’ve been successful in changing their mentality about homosexuals (they think we just wanna get laid) ... I have many dreams: the first is that all of your dreams will come true. The second dream is that all homosexuals will be able to live freely in Iran and get married. The third dream? Well I’ve never wished for anything else. Those are my ultimate dreams”

“Hi, I’m Lan and I’m 22 years old ... In a month’s time I’m going to leave Iran and go to Turkey. I was born near the tomb of Hafez [in Shiraz], right there where the birds and flowers are. For the last seven years, I’ve been playing music and I play bass guitar and like jazz music. I really want to be a bartender, a professional bartender. I am queer”

“I am Yar. I’m 26 years old and I am gay. I got my master’s degree in Hydraulic Structures. I have a boyfriend and I love him so much. I help others like me as much as I can. I like literature, history, and philosophy and I hope that one day I can live freely with my boyfriend in Iran”

“Hi, I’m Nima and I’m 28 years old. I was born in Tehran (Dezashib). My family knows I’m gay. I have a good life and I’m happy. I live in the Netherlands now. I have an Iranian boyfriend and I love him so much ... I’m a pharmacist, and I’m also interested in helping others like me. I love Playstation and playing football ... Life is not always easy but I try to focus on the good things in life”

“I’m Kian, I’m 27 years old and I graduated with a BA in psychology. I was 17 when I realised I was attracted to men, but I’ve never been sexually or emotionally attracted to women. I tried

many times [to be with a woman] ... I lived like that for years, struggling to satisfy my emotional and sexual needs ... I've been trying to find a partner for a long time, someone who's really like me, but it's hard"

FEMALE GROUP MEMBERS

"Hello, I'm Rey. I am 21 years old. I was born in Isfahan and I live in Shiraz. I chose to study petrochemical engineering but I regret it. I'd like to study music. I play the violin ... I am a lesbian and I am proud of it"

"I'm Vahi and I'm 25 years old. At the moment, I live in Shiraz, but I was born in Kuwait and lived there until I was 12. I studied hotel management and worked at a 5-star hotel. In a month's time I'll leave Iran and go to Turkey and then on to Canada. I live with my mum here. My dad is in Kuwait. They separated 10 years ago. I'm an only child and I'd like to continue my education in the field of computer science. I am a woman. I am a lesbian"

"I am Parvaneh but my friends call me Pari. I am 33 years old and I'm a lesbian. I'm from Tehran. I lived in Turkey for three years but I moved to Canada about six months ago. I suffered hard times in Turkey, very hard. The only good thing about living in Turkey was that I made good friends. By good friends, I mean real friends, and not those who are only there for you when the going is good. I don't wanna talk about the difficult time that I had there, as I am trying to forget it ... those days made me strong though ... I like where I am in life at the moment and I am proud of being a lesbian"

THEMES DISCUSSED BY GROUP MEMBERS

// Our group members discussed a diverse range of topics but, as we expected, not all of their conversation threads inspired a prolonged discussion or debate. Group members based outside Iran were generally more active within the group. This is for two reasons. Because of the stringency with which the Iranian government filters the internet, accessing Facebook from within the country's borders is a complicated affair. It is also less risky for gay Iranians outside the country, many of whom have claimed political asylum based on their sexuality, to be vocal online. Although the Small Media research team provoked discussion on a number of themes, we observed that group members tended to be more active on threads started by other group members. The themes below were instigated by group members and facilitated by the research team who stoked the discussions as they waned.

LONELINESS AND HOMESICKNESS

// The first theme our group members discussed was homesickness, loneliness and how it felt to leave Iran, not knowing when you would be able to come back. As is apparent from the group members' introductory statements, none of them really wanted to leave Iran. Those who had left were forced to because they could not live in secret anymore, and those who were still in Iran were either planning to leave or were so secreted away they no longer felt like they were integrated in society. A number of our group members were already living outside Iran and had already successfully claimed political asylum for their sexuality. The most common means of claiming asylum is for Iranians to flee to Turkey and apply for refugee status with

the UN commission there. If successful, they are then sent to another country. The road is most certainly tough for those LGBT Iranians who decide to leave, but others seeking political asylum on grounds other than for their sexuality often refer to these cases as *'golden cases'*, because their applications are generally approved.

At the time Lan and Vahi joined our group, they were preparing to go to Turkey together to seek asylum. They were hoping to be resettled in Canada or the Netherlands, anywhere more liberal than Iran, where they could be free to be themselves. First, they had to navigate life in Turkey, which, as Pari had advised them, was going to be hard. Indeed, two months after he arrived in Turkey, Lan sent Small Media a message saying that he had been severely let down by people he thought were his friends and had endured a great many hardships in his brief time there. Although he asked about the Netherlands, and whether we thought it would be a good place for him to live, he could already see that the road ahead would be long and arduous: *"I've only got God with me here. The two or three close friends I was depending on have really broken my heart. I'm just trying to get on with my own journey now"*.

A few months earlier, on 19 September 2011, Lan had told the group how he was feeling in the days leading up to his departure,

"[Leaving Iran] is like throwing a stone into darkness. You feel a sense of freedom but you don't know where your stone will land ... As the time to leave looms closer I get more and more depressed. But I might look back one day and smile about it all ... I'm not afraid of what happens in life because I know God has chosen the best for me ... I'm not religious but I do believe in such things. I am trying to enjoy these last days, but I can't. Even when I'm eating I feel like crying ... These days, time is passing more quickly than usual, as if it wants to show me something"

Vahi, Lan's travel partner, agreed: *"We will leave Iran together in a month. It's really hard to leave our families and what we have here, but as Lan said, we have to pay the price to get what we want"*. Over the course of the following week, our group members took part in a discussion about leaving Iran, loneliness, and homesickness. Those who had already left Iran were sympathetic and acknowledged the difficulty in leaving, all the while knowing you can probably never return.

Nima, who has been living in the Netherlands for a number of years and is a spokesperson for a gay rights organisation told Lan about the day he left Iran,

"I was living in Tehran. I remember I went to Nobonya Square and then down Sadr Highway. I started crying and saying goodbye to where I lived. The taxi driver thought someone close to me had died and I laughed at him and said that nobody had died, but that I was leaving Iran forever. I asked him to take me to Tajrish Square and then go all the way back along Sadr Highway again. Today, when I think about that day, I still cry"

Pari advised,

"Lan, my dear friend, from the moment I left Iran until this moment in time as I write this comment I miss the streets, parks and even the pollution. Nearly every day I go to YouTube and watch videos that show Tehran's streets. I watch Iranian movies, just to see the streets and remember the days I was living in Iran"

// It is important to understand that most LGBT Iranians do not actually want to leave their country. They are forced to leave. If they live their lives openly, they will be persecuted; if they bury themselves in the closet, their entire life becomes a lie. Of course, many gay and lesbian Iranians do remain in Iran. Some of them genuinely want to stay and perhaps, for them, leaving is an emotional impossibility. For others, leaving is an economic impossibility. Nonetheless, if the law changed and

homosexuality was decriminalised, many of the LGBT Iranians we spoke with would either stay in Iran or return from exile. Even if homophobia remained prevalent, many of them would choose to return after a change in the law. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, few of our group members were hopeful for a substantial change in either society or the law.

Yar, a younger member of our group, was optimistic: *“Leaving Iran is hard ... but think forward to the future. Think of the day you’ll be able to return. Good days are ahead of us”*. Group member Abi disagreed,

“I don’t think so. This will not happen. At least not for the next 20 years ... Even if we want to be optimistic and imagine the regime changing, do you think society would accept homosexuality that quickly? I doubt it. I hope you don’t think I’m a pessimist. I’m just talking based on my knowledge of our culture”

A debate between the pessimists and the optimists ensued with both highlighting valid points. Yar urged Abi to *“try and be optimistic”*. Pari interjected,

“We can’t see the future, so we can’t tell if it’s gloomy or not. But believe me. You make your own future with what you have in your mind now. Now that you are leaving Iran, start planning your future, what it is you want to do, and think of the day that you do return to Iran, the day that you’ll go back proudly”

Those who have fled Iran also had cautionary words for Lan and Vahi. Reza admitted that although he has more freedom now, he continues to live in fear: *"I still haven't reached paradise. I came out of hell and I'm stuck in limbo. Every day I endure stress and fear"*. Nima agreed that those planning to leave Iran should be aware of the struggles they will face during their journey,

"Today, I was talking with some friends who are planning to leave Iran. I don't know why, but some of them think they're going on vacation or something. They should prepare themselves for a hard life. The most interesting thing was that one of them asked me how much I was making [as a gay rights activist]. I was really offended. They thought that being a gay rights activist was a career, well, now they know that I'm not in it for any money"

On 26 September 2011 Lan wrote a pensive conclusion to the conversation,

"Thanks everyone. Your words made me cry and soothed me at the same time. If I couldn't foresee going back to Iran with a lot of good experiences under my belt, I wouldn't be able to leave ... I have good plans for the future and I hope everything works well. I see a good future ahead ... I know what I want and I will show everyone how successful a homosexual can be"

FRIENDSHIPS 5.3 AND RELATIONSHIPS

// Of their own volition, our research group members started a discussion about building friendships and romantic relationships with others. Yar was interested in knowing more about what Iranian homosexuals think about cohabitation and the dream of staying together forever when faced with a society that perceives gay relationships as strictly physical rather than emotional and spiritual. Pari said, *“Well this is not just about Iranians ... We [lesbians] chat online the first day, meet on the second day, and enter into a relationship on the third ... We need to know each other better before becoming partners”*. Ramin provided a more comprehensive response,

“The most important thing is that we don’t really know how to make friends. Unfortunately, in Iran, no one teaches you these kinds of things and people have to learn by experience. Not just gays, everyone, straight people as well. Therefore, people don’t know what kind of people they should look for. They don’t know that sexual attraction disappears quickly and that what keeps a relationship going is their friendship ... On the other hand, society makes it really difficult for us. Most gay people have pressure from their families, and there are not that many open-minded families who can cope with their sons or daughters being gay. So keeping a loving relationship, when it has to be secret, is really difficult. Sometimes, I think it would be easier to live alone rather than to endure the hundreds of problems”

The group members agreed that familial pressures made it more difficult for them, but Yar made a strong point about the effect that society has on Iranian LGBTs who are looking for stability in their relationships,

“If I had chosen to marry a woman then I would have been able to seek advice on who was the best for me. I could even have asked my family to help. But it’s really hard for us [gay

men] to find another guy who fulfils our ideal criteria. We're experiencing something new, uncharted territory, but do you think we can ever be together in a relationship like our parents were?"

Abi was quick to jump in,

"Our parents, with all the hardships they endured, and they still stayed together ... Do you think they did the right thing? And did they do it because they loved each other? Or for their children? Or was it because they were scared about what other people would say?"

// Abi's rhetorical questions are poignant. In Iranian society, saving face is very important. Marshall Crawford, an expatriate worker in Iran before the revolution, spoke with Small Media about the sexual relationships he had with Iranian men,

"Money was always an issue where Iranians were involved. Some were out and out prostitutes, but for others, I think it was more a case of saving face ... I found that a couple of packs of English cigarettes or a cassette of an English pop group worked and cash was not always required (e-mail communication, October 2011)"

Just as it was for the gay men who would only sleep with Marshall Crawford if some form of payment were involved, saving face is a crucial consideration before undertaking any public action in Iranian society. One of our respondents expressed that she was forced to smuggle her gay male friend into her family's apartment because if the neighbours found out they would shun her family. While a handful of more liberal parents might be accepting of their homosexual children, it is unlikely that they would ever offer this information freely to their own friends or social circles, or that it would be something they would necessarily be proud of. In addition, the dichotomies between dominant and submissive, man and woman, gay and lesbian, top and bottom, and butch and femme are firmly engrained across Iranian society.

HYPERMASCULINITY AND PATRIARCHY IN GAY AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

5.4

// The concept of hypermasculinity and patriarchy in lesbian and gay relationships is very interesting in Iran. Lesbians often play into a dichotomy whereby they have to *'act male'* in order to justify being with women. Gay men, on the other hand, are not perceived by society to be *'real'* men and their homosexuality strips away their masculinity in the eyes of society. Jerry Zarit, an expatriate living in Iran for four years before the Iranian Revolution (1979), described sexual advances in Iran as open and aggressive but noted, *"the fucker [the 'active' partner] is in no danger of being considered queer"* (Zarit 1992, p. 56). Zarit continued, *"Iran was for me, and others like me, a sexual paradise ... yet with one or two exceptions, I never met an Iranian in his own country who would completely acknowledge his sexuality."* David Reed relayed a similar experience: *"More than once a sex partner asked me how I could do such a dirty, demeaning thing. When I would ask, 'Well what were you doing?' he would respond, 'But I was the man'"* (Reed 1992, p. 65).

// Speaking exclusively with Small Media, lesbian activist Shadi Amin said, *"Neither straight men nor women are particularly threatened by gay men. They perceive them as weak; they don't see them as real men. But lesbian women, well they pose a threat. Straight men think they [lesbians] will take their wives away from them, and straight women can't be friends with them because of social taboos".*

It is interesting that to *'dominate'* another man through a sexual act is a hypermasculinising behaviour in Iranian society. However, although sexual acts between males may be encouraged in jail cells as a form of psychological and physical torture for political prisoners, the repercussions are far more serious when it occurs on live television. In a National Premiere

³⁸ [http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=bPeCpq8VvKLo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPeCpq8VvKLo)

League game between Persepolis and Damash on 29 October 2011, two Persepolis players celebrated separate goal scoring incidents by groping each other's bottoms very forcefully through their shorts.³⁸ The football match was, like most Iranian games, a live broadcast, and the event caused a huge backlash in the Iranian media. All of the news agencies that covered the stories agreed that the actions of the two players were vulgar and obscene. One of the players was expelled and the other received a half-season suspension for causing "material and moral damage" to Persepolis Football Club (Hamshahri Online, 2011).

Chairman of the Persepolis Athletic and Cultural Club, Mohammad Royanian said, "*Since the club is based on core cultural values and ethics, the obscene behaviour of two Persepolis players during the match with Damash will not be tolerated*" (Hamshahri Online, 2011). Iranian TV later apologised to the public for the scene broadcast inadvertently on live television, which they referred to as "*disgusting*". They also censored the scene from delayed coverage of the match. Yar, a member of our Facebook group said,

"No, I don't think these two should have showed their 'happiness' [about scoring the goal] in front of the cameras and spectators. But you don't know what Iranian men are like. Although they are not gay, they like to touch each other. They pinch each other and make strange pranks and it's really shocking. And then when it comes to us [gay men] they freak out"

As discussed earlier in this report, the level of public affection displayed between friends of the same gender in Iran reflects a same-sex physical intimacy that is culturally acceptable in Iran but is not common in the West. In addition, there is still a common misconception in Iran and Iranian communities that gay men are interested solely in sex. Furthermore, it is far easier for Iranian society to accept this, than the fact that they also

desire to be emotionally intimate with their partner. The fact that constitutional law distinguishes between the 'passive' and 'active' partner reflects the general perception across Iranian society that homosexuality is a deviant and sexual behaviour where one 'hyper-masculine' partner takes advantage of a weaker one. There seems to be a clear distinction made between homosexual intercourse and homosexual intimacy in the Islamic Republic and one of the reasons for this is because while homosexual intercourse can be perceived as a kink, or a hobby, emotional intimacy between same-sex partners poses an immense challenge to Iran's firmly engrained patriarchal order.

So what do gay Iranians want from their relationships? Yar answered,

"I have a definition for what a relationship should be in my mind. I'd like to have a stable life with my partner like other [straight] men and women who live together for years. But if other people don't want that, they should make it clear [that they don't want to stay together forever] what they want from the beginning and then they can break up after a while"

Pari responded to Yar's comment, arguing that it was wrong to compare homosexual relationships with heterosexual relationships, "Because this inevitably leads to a discussion about patriarchy. We need to avoid this kind of comparison". Abi suggested, "Patriarchy and domination over women also exists among homosexuals. It might exist secretly, but it exists". This comment angered Pari who then responded,

"I am a woman with a lot of feminine emotions. Wearing sporty clothes doesn't decrease from my femininity. I am interested in women, real women, not those who want to act like men. If I wanted to be with a woman who wants to be like a man, well there are plenty of real men out there"

Abi clarified, *“Pari, I didn’t mean that what people wear shows whether or not they act like a man or a woman ... I’m talking about interactions. One can be a ‘bottom’ but still have some masculine characteristics at the same time”.*

The fact that such clear dichotomies between passive and active, butch and femme, top and bottom exist in Iran is most certainly to the detriment of LGBT communities both inside the country and in diaspora. This is clearly a façade, but because people are not open about their sexuality in general, effeminate gay men and masculine lesbian women are the most visible members of the LGBT community because they stand out against the background of ‘normal’ society. If Iranian society is going to change its opinion on homosexuality, then gay and lesbian Iranians need to come out to their friends and family. As more and more gay and lesbian Iranians come out, homosexuality becomes more accessible, more commonplace, and less frightening.

This is by no means a new concept. In 1869, German homosexual rights advocate Karl Keinrich Ulrichs urged gays to come out of the closet and reveal their same-sex attractions. He claimed that invisibility was an obstacle to changing public opinion and that self-disclosure could eventually lead to emancipation. As homosexuality becomes more visible, it will hopefully be redefined. One day, we hope, homosexuality will be reconceptualised in the Islamic Republic and will no longer be considered an anomaly, mental illness, or crime. The LGBT Iranians we spoke with certainly did not play into such dichotomies and the thematic case studies we present below reveal an inspiring sense of diversity.

THEMATIC CASE STUDIES 5.5

// At the conclusion of our research project, we sent questionnaires to a number of our primary contacts. We asked them to pass these along to friends who they thought were less likely to have their voices heard in any other context. We specifically requested that they encourage friends who did not write blogs or take part in social activism in the public sphere to complete the questionnaires. We wanted to hear from those who are less active in society, those who are more afraid of being *'found out'*, and those who are less visible. The questionnaires presented here are all anonymous; Small Media does not personally know the respondents nor do we have an ongoing connection with any of them.

// We asked our core group of primary contacts to disseminate the questionnaires for us and we stipulated that respondents should reply with open format answers, as if they were speaking with a close friend. Through their statements, they share with you both the pain and the pleasure of their everyday lives and we are gratefully indebted to them. We have chosen not to interpret or analyse what our respondents said to us, as their words are simple, poignant, and self-explanatory. The thematic organisation of their statements clearly shows what issues are paramount in their lives and they also form a strong basis of evidence supporting the recommendations at the conclusion of this report.

// We based our questionnaires around five themes: *trust, coming out, the virtual world, past/present/future, and the reactions of family and friends.*

The responses we received are simultaneously heart-warming, tragic, inspiring, horrific, and hopeful. We have presented them in their entirety in order to maintain the logical flow and particular way of speaking of each of our respondents.

TRANSGENDER QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

5.6

1.

// Trust

"I've never really trusted someone and then found out that he or she was lying, because I make sure I know someone absolutely and completely before I trust them. Being transgender is my own business and it doesn't concern anyone else. I still wear women's clothes and I'm still living as a woman, but I will have my operation soon. I need time to get to know someone before I can trust him or her, especially in today's world"

// Coming out

"For as long as I can remember, I've been a boy with some physical problems [female genitalia]. In March 2011, I was invited to one of my friends houses, but instead of playing with my friends, I went to play X-Box with my friend's little brother ... And then when everyone was gone and it was just me and my friend, she looked at me and said, "You have a problem. You are not like us at all. Your behaviour is totally different. But when I look at you carefully, I see that it's beyond your control. You have a problem, go, and figure out what it is". I agreed with her, told her how I felt and told her that I was going to have a sex change operation one day ... When I found out that I was something called 'transsexual' and that there are many others like me, I was so happy ... I don't usually tell people who don't know me about being trans, because I'm still wearing women's clothing. I've never regretted telling anyone so far, but I am more comfortable telling a fellow trans that I am transsexual because he/she can understand what I'm going through"

// The virtual world

“The internet is very important for me. Before I had the internet, my entire life was dedicated to playing computer games. I use the internet for research, information, chat, entertainment ... I use the internet about 9–10 hours per day. I connect to the internet using Wi Max. I met most of my trans friends online before meeting them in real life”

// Past/present/future

“I’m 18 years old, and I’m a female to male transsexual. I’m sexually attracted to women. I live in Tehran and I’m unemployed. I haven’t gone to university yet. I’m going to go after I’ve had my operation. My field of study is biotechnology. I like listening to music, reading books, going to plays, watching horror movies, adventure movies, mystery movies, I like metal music, rock, and punk, and I am absolutely crazy about Marilyn Manson”

// Reaction of family and friends

“When I was a kid, maybe 9 or 10, my aunt told my mother that she was certain I was going to have ‘issues’. I didn’t really need to ever ‘tell’ anyone, because it was always pretty obvious I had a ‘problem’. The issue was that nobody knew what the problem was called. My sister reacted the worst out of everyone. She worried so much when she found out I have to have an operation. But my father reacted the best. He said, ‘Whatever science says’”

2.

// Trust

“Before I can really trust someone, I have to get to know his or her true character. I try to make sure I really know somebody before I trust them. Yes, I’ve told my family and some other people that I’m trans, but you need to know someone before you can trust them with information like that. It doesn’t usually take that long to trust someone, because everything in the virtual world is easier”

// Coming out

“When I was a kid, I knew I was different. I felt different. But I was absolutely sure about it when I was 10 years old. When I found out I wasn’t alone, that I wasn’t the only transsexual, I felt so happy. It was like I’d been given the world. I was also very happy when I found out I could have the operation in Iran. No one had really noticed anything different about me and everyone was insisting I was ‘normal’ until recently”

// The virtual world

“The internet is very important to me. I don’t remember what life was like before the internet because I’ve always had access to it. I use the internet for everything: getting general information, specialized research, downloading music and software ... Basically, whatever I want, I look on the internet first. I use an ADSL connection and I think I spend about four hours a day on there. I think I’m addicted. I had a date once with a male to female transsexual I met online on the Helpftm weblog. We went to the Blood Transfusion Institute to have a karyotype test and we met up there”

// Past/present/future

"I'm 19 years old, a female to male transsexual and I'm interested in women. I was born in Sanandaj and I still live in Sanandaj. I'm unemployed and I'm not a student yet because I failed the university entrance exam ... I read books, watch movies, go out, listen to music, and go on the net ... I used to play sport as well. It's hard to say what kind of music I like because I listen to lots of different types. I don't watch TV at all really ... I have many hopes and dreams. I hope to get the permit to have the operation, have the operation in summer, get a good grade in the university entrance exams so I can choose my own field of study, start my classes with my new ID, and, God willing, find a part time job. This is my plan for the next few years, and I'll decide the rest later! ... I love my mum more than anything. I'd like to live right here in Sanandaj, or maybe in London. I'd like to study aerospace engineering because I love aircrafts and rockets and have done since I was a kid"

// Reaction of family and friends

"My cousin reacted the best out of everyone. He asks me all the time what I'm doing and when I'm doing to do it [have the operation]. The worst reaction was from my sister. When I first told her, she threw me out of the house. I regret telling my uncle, because he worries about me a lot. He lives in another country, but he's very worried about me and thinks about it all the time, so I regret telling him. I don't really want to tell anyone else. I could tell everyone, I'm comfortable with it, but I don't want to"

3.

// Trust

“I’ve always trusted everyone and told everyone all my secrets. I’ve never lied and I’ve always said everything to friends and strangers alike. I’ve said to people that my ‘existence was indeterminable’, and some people abused this information and some didn’t. I’m not homosexual but I am a sexual minority, and this is a huge problem in this country. Trusting people in the virtual world is easier because you are not as afraid of getting hurt by someone who is thousands of kilometres away from you”

// Coming out

“I’m not homosexual but I do understand how they feel and know a lot about their struggle. Despite what others think, I don’t look at homosexuals differently. I realised I was different when I was three or four years old, but I don’t remember when I found out that I wasn’t alone. When I found out, I was actually very upset to know that there are some other people suffering the same problem. I didn’t want anyone else to have to experience this pain”

// The virtual world

“It’s been eight years since I first connected to the internet and now it’s an inseparable part of my life. Before the internet I had a ‘normal’ life ... I use the internet for talking with my virtual friends, those friends that understand me without having even met me or seen me in real life. They like me without seeing/meeting me, not like those people I’ve been with my whole life who’ve never understood me. These days I spend about eight hours a day online and if one day I can’t go online, it feels like a chunk of me is missing. I’m so used to the internet and my online friends because I don’t have any true friends in real life. I use ADSL to go online and I’ve got to know many people via the internet. I’ve only ever met one person in real life that I talked to

first online, but because she was a trans woman like me, I actually felt sad after meeting her. I didn't want my life to be like her life, because it's very hard to be alone and I hate this loneliness"

// Past/present/future

"I guess I'm a man. Well, not a man. I am pain. Just pain. I am a male to female transsexual, 26 years old, and I'd like to be recognised as a woman. I have all of these pure feminine emotions welling up inside me. I don't know if they call this sexuality or not, but I know who I am. I am a human being but I was created with an imperfection. I'm someone that nobody wants to be friends with, someone that her own family doesn't even like. I'm attracted to men and I consider myself to be a woman. I was born in Lorestan and I still live there. I've been unemployed for two years. Nobody will employ me because of the way that I am. I mostly listen to easy listening music and watch romantic movies, because there is something in them that I've never truly experienced. And that is love. Love. I long to become a woman, get married, have a family, and find a good job like other people. I just want to live. I love my family very much and I hate people who hurt me. I'd like to live in a free society with open-minded people. It doesn't matter where, anywhere. I'd like to work for a company, because I'm good at PR. I like to be surrounded by people, but people always reject me. It's as if I'm from another planet and they don't want to be seen with me"

// Reaction of family and friends

"I told my family I'm trans, but it wasn't easy. I finally found the courage to tell them after 26 years. They didn't accept it so easily, and they haven't accepted it fully yet. My little brother understands me and supports me. He could tell I was trans, but he's more my friend than my brother"

4.

// Trust

"I have to rely on my instincts for trust. Yeah, more than once I've trusted somebody and found out later that they lied to me. It doesn't really take time to trust someone, just instincts. It's easier to trust people in the virtual world"

// Coming out

"I knew I was trans since the age of four or five but I didn't know what it was called. I learnt it later from a magazine. When I found out that I'm not alone I was really happy but I was also sad to see that people are suffering like me. Everyone said I was different when I was a kid, but as a kid, it wasn't that important to me. It was obvious from my appearance, so there was no need to tell anyone"

// The virtual world

"My life is totally dependent on the internet. Before the internet my life was just about computer games. Now I use the internet for studying, research, and entertainment. I use the internet a good 10 hours a day. I found most of my friends online, and by friends, I don't mean partners, just normal friends"

// Past/present/future

"I'm 25 years old. I'm straight. I was born in Urmia. At the moment, I live in Germany. I'm a student studying electronics. I listen to music and play on the computer. That's my entertainment. Matrix and Saw are the best movies, because the director, like me, thinks outside the box. We have the exact same mentality. My wish is to have the life that I've imagined since childhood. But I kind of do have that now. I love my family and my future wife more than everyone. I've learnt to kill hate in myself so I don't

hate anyone. I don't like living in the same place for long because I get bored quickly. I'd like to become a successful engineer and have my own company. I'd also like to be a university tutor"

// Reaction of family and friends

"The best reaction was from my sister who helped me with my operation a lot. The worst reaction? I don't remember. They were all pretty bad, but I don't remember the worst. And I don't regret telling anyone. I actually felt a sense of relief. It was so obvious and everyone knew anyway. The easiest person to tell was my sister"

LESBIAN QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

5.7

1.

// Trust

"I trusted my girlfriend but she totally lied to me. She still does lie to me, but I can't leave her because I love her. I've trusted a lot of people and have told them that I'm a lesbian. I'm not afraid of telling anyone. I don't need to trust someone to tell them I'm gay because this is who I am and I haven't committed any crime"

// Coming out

"I realised I was a lesbian when I was in the eighth grade. I was very connected to one of my friends who I had known for eight years but I didn't know what the feeling was. Even when other friends were sitting beside her or even sitting near her, I felt jealous. Then she started dating a guy and I felt like I was going to die. It was then I realised what I was truly feeling"

// The virtual world

"I started using the internet when I was 11 years old and I've always been addicted to it. My life is totally dependent on the internet. I used to go on sports websites but now I am addicted to Facebook. I've met a lot of people on Facebook and I have had both good and bad experiences. I think it's a nice place to find good friends but it's also a bit difficult sometimes"

// Past/present/future

"I'm 17 years old, I'm gay, I'm sporty, and I really like sports and music"

// Reaction of family and friends

"I told my parents and my dad had the best reaction. He accepted it very well. I've told many people I'm gay and I have been faced with a lot of bad reactions. My uncle is very religious. Once we were talking about homosexuals and my cousin insulted gay people and said they're really strange and I was really upset but I couldn't tell her I'm a lesbian because she is a relative and if I told her then she would tell everyone else"

2.

// Trust

"Whoever I've trusted wholly and emotionally, well, all their feelings were fleeting lies. Although I should probably say that up until this point, all of my girlfriends have actually been straight. In general, I'm an optimist and trust everyone, but I can't trust people with my emotions anymore. I haven't told anyone directly that I'm gay, but everyone knows. If someone asked me directly then I would tell the truth, and if they didn't like it, then they could stop hanging out with me. In my opinion, if you can't trust anyone in the real world, then how can you trust someone in the virtual world? I don't trust the virtual world either"

// Coming out

"From the age of three or four I felt like I didn't really want to be a 'girl' and I realised I was attracted to people of the same sex. I think I was the first one to figure it out, but later on my family realised how I was. I've been talking about it with my little sister since I was 21 but I haven't talked to any of my other family members about it. However, I know they don't really have any problems with it. I have some very good friends, and when I told them that I'm gay, it didn't make any difference to our friendship. They all said they knew already. Up until I was 30, I didn't really tell anyone, or even want to tell them, but now I don't care and I don't mind people knowing"

// The virtual world

"The internet is very important to me. I use it a lot and I'm in touch with my friends via the internet. I reckon I'm addicted to it. But I haven't dated anyone online, so the internet isn't important for me for that side of things. I'm online almost all of the time and I've had WIFI for about nine months"

// Past/present/future

"I'm female, 34 years old, I have a Master's in Physical Education and I am a basketball player. I was born and raised in Tehran and I still live in Tehran. I make belts and bags from leather. I worked for eight years as a sports expert at a local university. I love music, film and TV ... The L Word, Prison Break, Heroes, Lost, Friends, and How I Met Your Mother are my favourite shows. I listen to all kinds of music. I've taken a course in Ableton Live to learn how to DJ and to produce minimal, deep house and trip hop music. I dream of playing electronic music and of becoming a DJ one day. At the moment I work for a coffee shop and I do like my job. I'd like to leave Iran, I'm getting pretty sick of people and I've been really hurt in my relationships. Maybe I'd go to London or Irvine. I'd like to be a basketball coach, but to be a DJ would be my ideal job"

// Reaction of family and friends

“My family is really cool and I don’t have any problems or issues with them. One of the relationships I was in was pretty painful because I heard a lot of bad talk indirectly from her family. I was really annoyed. But in general, I haven’t had many problems. I often feel like I don’t belong to society and feel like maybe I should change who I am, but I also think about how that would affect my family”

GAY MALE 5.8 QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

1.

// Trust

“I usually trust people right off the bat but, unfortunately, this trust has backfired a number of times. I still like to be optimistic, which is especially important for us [homosexuals] because our number is limited and it’s difficult to find like-minded people. The initial trust is very important ... Actually, all of my friendships and relationships began in the virtual world. I do think meeting people in person is better, but for me the virtual world was the best way to find people like myself ... One of the disadvantages of the virtual world is that you can’t really get an accurate picture of what someone is really like before you meet them in person”

// Coming out

“I was about 14 when I first heard the word ‘hamjensgara’ [homosexual] ... but it took longer to find out more. My classmates were after girls but I was after my classmates! ... When I was 14 I also fell in love for the first time, but the person I was in love with was not homosexual and it was very hard for me ...

I don't think anyone knew I was gay before I realised myself, but I can't say for sure. It was probably strange to my classmates that I wasn't reacting to the same things that made them horny. Yes. I have told my mother and father, two of my friends, and my cousin. The best reaction was that of one of my uni friends, he was very open-minded. The worst reaction was of course from my parents and they still can't accept it. The interesting part is that they accept others, and they believe homosexuality is real [rather than an illness], but they can't accept it for their own son. At the moment I do regret telling my parents ... Yes, there are people who I'd like to come out to, but I haven't been able to. I hate secrecy, and I think that if it weren't for my parents I would have told everyone"

// The virtual world

"Words can't describe how important the internet is for me. My life was totally different before I had access to the internet. I was a nerd that was completely oblivious to everything around me and I didn't have a single homosexual friend. Usually I use the internet to check my emails, read news, and keep up with Facebook. I used to chat a lot but I don't chat much now. I used to use websites like Manjam for finding homosexual friends, but I deleted my profile. I get online about three hours a day at the moment, but I was online a lot more before. I use ADSL internet at home. I've met a lot of people online whom I've then met in person. Because I live in a really small city, where the homosexual community (if there even is one in our city!) is very very secretive ... the only way for me is the internet"

// Past/present/future

"I'm 26 years old. I'm a homosexual man. I was born in Bandar Anzali and I still live here. I have just finished studying and I have a Master's degree in civil engineering, road design and traffic. At the moment, I don't have a permanent job but I'm looking for one. I really like following news and politics, so

much so that I can never really get enough ... I like music, and my favourite music is pretty much 90% pop. My favourite singers are Googoosh, Ajda Pekkan, Shohreh, Ramesh, Madonna, and Siavash Ghomeishi. I have many hopes and dreams for the future and although they are not big, they seem nearly impossible to achieve given the current situation. I would like to live in peace with a lover, but I wouldn't like to have a repetitive life like some people have ... I don't like political and religious ideologies or fanaticism. If homosexuals were free in Iran, I'd like to stay here, but in the current climate, I'd like to live anywhere BUT Iran. England, Australia, the Scandinavian countries, America and Canada are the best options. My ideal job would be related to news and politics. I like journalism but now that I haven't studied journalism in an academic context, I guess I'd better find a job with a high income in my own field so that I can become independent more quickly"

// Reaction of family and friends

"The first person I came out to was my cousin. I was alone, in a bad space, and I really needed to talk to someone. He was a medical student and was born and raised in the US. I thought he'd understand, but he didn't. He made my life immensely difficult after I told him and it wasn't until he tested me and interrogated me that he finally accepted I was truly gay ... I'm sure if I had been open about being gay [in society] I would have been abused. But if I say that I even see myself as being part of this society, I'd be telling the biggest lie of my life. I don't see myself as part of this society at all and that's because of my homosexuality and the Iranian people's mentality about homosexuality ... I usually say 'your country' instead of 'my country' or 'our country' ... In June 2009 I voted for the first time and I voted for Karoubi. It's a long story and all I can really say is that I didn't vote for reform, I voted for him because I thought it would lead to the collapse of the Islamic Republic ... At the moment, whether I like it or not, I'm pretty active in what's happening in terms of

this society and my only goal really is to free Iran from religious fundamentalism and promote public understanding. This would lead to the freedom of homosexuals and women. I support the Green Movement, but the part of it that is looking for the regime to collapse, not for it to reform ... My ideal society is one where nobody interferes with the thoughts, beliefs, or sexual orientation of others. A society in which everybody, from every perspective, is free. Everyone! From me, the gay atheist, to the religious fundamentalist, and to the communist, without any external involvement"

2.

// Trust

"Trust can only develop where there is transparency. In my life, I've trusted very few people, especially when it comes to my sexual identity, and those whom I've trusted have generally been homosexual as well. And those interactions weren't more than superficial social encounters. In order to trust people, I need transparency and honesty more than time. Trusting people in the virtual world is much harder, because in the virtual world, people can add an extra mask to those they already have and it's hard to figure out exactly who someone is and what their intentions are"

// Coming out

"I was 19 or 20 when I found out that I liked someone from the same sex as much as I was attracted to people of the opposite sex. I'm pretty sure even now that I'm bisexual. I don't remember exactly why, but when I realised I was bisexual, I started doing a lot of research and reading both supporting and opposing views about it in terms of reacting in any particular way. Then, gradually, I got to know about some homosexual movements happening inside the country, and that all started when I saw an interview with Mr. [Arsham] Parsi on the BBC. Because I'm

bisexual, I've never really acted in any unusual way that would make people guess my sexual orientation. Apart from this 'LGBT family' of ours, I've only told one of my friends about my sexual orientation. I know he's open-minded and that's why I told him. He reacted in a pretty positive way and offered his support. He listened to me without judging me and I'm really thankful to him for this"

// The virtual world

"The internet is a great portal and because of the limitations on us here in Iran I do make use of its possibilities. It's helped me a lot to analyse my situation and my identity. I use the internet to go on Facebook, to read news, or to do research on a special issue. I use the internet for two or three hours per day. I tried to find a partner in Yahoo's chat rooms a few times, but I wasn't successful. I probably failed because of my criteria and because of the polluted atmosphere of the internet. And I preferred being alone to being with some of them. I actually don't like making friends online at all. I'd rather find my partner through friends or at least in the real world"

// Past/present/future

"I'm male and I'm 22 years old. I was born in Mazandaran province and at the moment, I'm studying electrical engineering in Babol. I spend my time listening to music, reading books, watching TV, hanging out with my friends, and sometimes I go to the gym ... I watch foreign movies and TV shows more than Iranian ones. I really like the TV series 'Fringe' and the film The Professional ... Whatever I become in the future, I want to be happy with what I'm doing and live without regret. I like liberal and honest people and I don't like those who darken the pure human emotions and try to make them pessimistic. I would hate myself if I turned out like that"

// Reaction of family and friends

“I haven’t told my family yet, those around me can’t find out about my sexual orientation. It could also be because they don’t acknowledge that homosexuals or bisexuals exist. I consider myself to be part of this society and an Iranian. I never thought of boycotting the elections. I think that bad is better than worse. In my opinion, taking part in social movements has two prerequisites. The first and foremost is to have a goal, and the second one is security, both financial and emotional security. The Green Movement is a civil movement and it is trying to strengthen its position in Iran. Of course, nothing is ever totally good or totally bad but I don’t think the Green Movement would be accepting of homosexuals at this point in time. My ideal society would be one where the human needs of all can be provided for properly. The need for food, clothing, freedom, security, relationships, loving and being loved, and sex”

3.

// Trust

“With the way Iran is right now, trusting people is both difficult and dangerous. Either you should take the risk and just trust people or you should be very very cautious about it ... You know, because of the isolation we face as homosexuals [inside Iran], it’s possible that we’ll meet someone like us and trust them too quickly. The reason that eventually you trust people is because you get tired of wearing a mask, especially when the mask doesn’t fit you properly ... Yes, in many cases, you’re actually forced to trust people ... Maybe if Iran was like the Netherlands or the UK it wouldn’t take as long to trust people, but because we’re living in Iran we should be very careful. Trusting people in the virtual world is very hard and very dangerous because the other person can mislead you easily”

// Coming out

“I’ve had same-sex attraction since the age of five, I liked it, and I understood the feeling. Obviously, at that time, I didn’t know that I was homosexual, but I remember that my older brother had a book with pictures of body builders in it, like Rocky, Frankie and Arnold, who were wearing short and very tight underwear while they posed and I used to look at the photos in secret ... It made me really happy when I found out there were other people like me, but I didn’t make contact with any other homosexuals until the age of 25. Although I knew I was gay, I hadn’t accepted it yet ... The worst reaction I got after telling someone was from my older brother. He’s been living in Australia for years now and has a PhD in geophysics. I thought that living there might have changed his opinion about homosexuality, but it hadn’t ... He said he felt sick and that I’d put him off his lunch. And then he said I have to see a psychiatrist ... I’d like to tell the whole world that I’m gay, but there are many people that I simply cannot tell”

// The virtual world

“The Internet is very important for me. I used to be the editor of an online journal, so having access to the Internet has always been my first priority. I’ve found many of my friends online and I am in touch with them via internet ... I’ve never really felt lonely. I had friends but none of them felt the same was as me so I guess although I had many friends I didn’t have any that really understood me. But when the Internet came into my life, it opened up a whole new landscape for me. I say with certainty that it was internet that helped me to accept my homosexuality. On average I spend two hours on the internet ... I use an ITC [Information Technology Company of Iran] connection to get online, like all other Iranians [inside Iran]”

// Past/present/future

"I'm 26 years old, but if I say I am a man it seems old, so I am a boy, a gay boy. I was born in Iran and I still live in Iran. I live in Lorestan now and I'm in the last semester of my master's degree in hydraulic structures. I don't really have that many hobbies but I like reading a lot. I also enjoy reading and composing poems ... In general, I love jazz, blues and rock music, because its tone is new and innovative in Iran ... I like music that has overtones of protest. When I'm sad, I listen to the second group of music. Haydeh, Mahasti, Moein, Daryoush, Ebi ... because I feel my emotions reflected in their lyrics and music ... I have many wishes, especially for the future. I'd like to live a healthy and ethical life with the boy or man that I love ... I'd like to live with my partner freely in Iran. I'd like my family and all other families to accept us. I'd like to be fairly well off and I'd like to become a successful journalist ... If we could imagine a free Iran and that Iran was a democratic country or at least that the circumstances were shifting towards democracy, to the point where I could express my sexual orientation freely and without fear, I would have liked to live in Iran. But if you mean outside of Iran, I'd like to live in Canada or Germany"

// Reaction of family and friends

"Some people might laugh at me behind my back because of the way I talk and because of my mannerisms. I've always considered myself to be a part of the society I live in, and I don't see any reason for us to be treated any differently from others. Yes, I participated in the elections, because I wanted to determine my own destiny. Now that I've realised voting in Iran is a big joke, I'm not going to participate anymore ... When I fight adverse conditions in Iran and become a part of the society, it would be nice for other people to accept me too. Therefore, if someone talks about freedom but doesn't recognise my rights, I'd try to limit interaction with them. But I'd never isolate myself to the point where I don't know what is going on inside the country"

... The ideal society for me is a society where human individuality, respecting people's privacy and respecting all members of society are the most important issues. I'd like to live in a society where homosexuality is accepted and morality is respected. I don't know if my family and friends know that I'm gay, because Iranian families don't know much about homosexuality. However, they keep telling me that I'm so cute and such a sissy and that I'm effeminate, but not in an offensive way. They know I'm different but they don't know I'm 'gay'"

4.

// Trust

"There's no basis for trust, I never trust anyone. Since childhood, I've always been a suspicious person, it's probably because I had a bad experience with my family when I was young and because of that, I became like this, but although I don't remember a specific experience, from what I can gather, I've always expected that people won't follow through on their promises or do the things they say they'll do unless I keep on them to do it. I don't trust people, but I have told a lot of people [that I'm gay]. I don't trust anyone. I've always got this feeling that it's possible they might use my homosexuality against me and I'm always ready for the consequences of that ... It doesn't matter where they are, online or in real life, I'm fully aware of the fact that they can hurt me, and I'm ready for that"

// Coming out

"My family knows that I'm gay and we've talked a lot about it and we've had our fair share of problems too. But if anyone asks I'll tell them I'm gay. I've never really had a reaction that I could call the 'best reaction' because it's not as if someone is supposed to give me a gold medal or shout with joy when I tell them I'm gay. Maybe the best reaction would be no reaction at all and seeing the situation as normal, just like how I don't expect to see

any reaction when someone asks how old I am and I say I'm 29. I've never regretted telling anyone I was gay, but it's easier to talk about it with someone who is gay themselves"

// The virtual world

"When the Internet came into my life, everything changed really quickly. I was 17 years old, a critical age for most young people, who are coming face to face with so many changes and their bodies are changing too ... [I use the Internet for] communicating, specialised research about computers, general research about homosexuality, to get news, play online games, publish content (blog, website, comments), and learn things (like English, cooking etc) ... I actually have a few computers and at least one of them is switched on and connected to the Internet 24 hours a day 7 days a week, so I guess I'm actually always online ... I've got a DSL connection. The first time I encountered another homosexual was online. It was in the year 1999 and I used the website Gay Iran to find other Iranian homosexuals and on that site you could write messages and make friends. So I wrote someone a message, and then an email, then we sent a few emails back and forth, which led to a phone call, and then we met each other in person"

// Past/present/future

"I see myself first as a gay man first and as a human second. I'm unemployed and enjoy playing computer games. I'm self-confident, but hate Islam and religious people. I live in Tehran and wouldn't change my life in any way. I don't know what my ideal job is, but I'd do anything I could if I had to work. I was about 16 years old when I realised I was gay. I was always different from other boys; I was more interested in playing with girls and dolls. But after puberty, I realised what my sexual orientation was ... I always thought other people were more or less interested in the same sex as well. I used to think some boys at school liked other boys like I did, but later when we started to

talk about sex I realised I was in the minority ... I always behaved differently from the way our society believes a male should behave and this was obvious and people around me noticed. I see myself as a social activist and I strive to improve the treatment of homosexuals in society. I can't say exactly what it is that I do [in Iran] for security reasons, but I'm involved in trying to raise awareness about homosexuality, improving the visibility of homosexuals in society and improving the daily lives of homosexuals"

// Reaction of family and friends

"When I told my parents we had a huge argument and my friends, well I only told them at graduation, and then because I was so nonchalant about it, nobody dared to confront me with their own opinion ... I've never ever been receptive to their comments and opinions, especially about myself, and so whatever reaction or opinion they had, they kept it to themselves. I'm 'out' to pretty much everyone around me, like workmates, family, and classmates ... I'm opposed to the Islamic government and religion in all forms, and especially with people like Khatami ... because I felt they were more dangerous for people like me because they knew how to control society while deeply embedding religion in it. If, by 'taking part' you mean to ask whether or not I collaborated with "the general public" for 'improvement', then no, and I would never ever do something like that, but I will do anything, absolutely anything, to support the best interests of myself and other homosexuals. From a social perspective, I am not at all a passive member, but I don't work with the general society because I actually consider it to be my enemy, which I need to fight against, rather than for ... I did actually take part in the protests [following the election]"

SUMMARY 5.9

// Through our research we discovered that LGBT Iranians find it difficult to trust even those closest to them and this lack of trust plays into a perpetual cycle of low self-esteem and of feeling ostracised from society. There is also a deep desire among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Iranians, for each group to assert themselves as unique from one another, which leads to the segregation of LGBT Iranians from each other, as well as from society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there was a recent call by some to eliminate the 'B' from LGBT. In addition, we were privy to an online argument on an activists wall about a Facebook group that was established solely for lesbians became very heated when gay men complained of being discriminated against. However, despite the segregation of LGBT communities in Iran, the responses we received to our questionnaire illuminated some interesting commonalities. To some extent, all Iranians have to censor their true selves in public. The intensely strict regulation of the public sphere in Iran leads people to act very differently depending on the context they are in at any given time, and being LGBT gives our respondents an extra layer to hide. Being '*found out*' can lead to extreme consequences and it is completely understandable for Iran's LGBTs to live intensely secretive lives, when verbal testimony in court provides enough evidence to convict and punish someone for their sexuality.

// Thus, '*coming out*' is far more complicated in repressed societies like Iran's than it is in societies where sexuality is openly talked about both in public and in the media. When sexuality is such a taboo topic, it is extremely difficult to choose who to come out to, and what to say when you do. In their stories about '*coming out*', our respondents told us their families and friends had often reacted unpredictably to the revelation, which further cemented their feeling of distrust and made them less likely to tell others of their sexuality in the future.

All of our respondents expressed feeling an overwhelming sense of relief when they realised for the first time that they were not alone. The internet has played an immense role in fostering a feeling of belonging and many members of Iran's online LGBT community talk more freely with people they have never met than with those they see on an everyday basis, often spending upwards of eight hours per day online.

In spite of the adversity they face on a daily and ongoing basis LGBT Iranians are, on the whole, inspiringly optimistic. Most of the respondents we spoke with expressed that their deep desire to leave Iran was complicatedly entangled within a deep-rooted love for the country. Some have naïve aspirations of an easy life in exile but many of those who end up seeking asylum become lost in the system, unaware of how to present their case because they are so accustomed to hiding their true selves from authority figures. There are a number of activists (such as Saghi Ghahraman, Arsham Parsi and Shadi Amin) who work very closely with asylum seekers in Turkey, but more help is needed.

In the next section we discuss DegarVajeh, an online glossary project designed and hosted by Small Media and bequeathed to the Iranian LGBT community. This discussion segues nicely into the concluding phrases of the report, which offer some recommendations to policy makers and individuals interested in helping Iran's LGBT community to flourish.

DEGARVAJEH: AN ONLINE GLOSSARY PROJECT FOR LGBT IRAN AND A MODEL FOR FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

// As a research team with altruistic tendencies, we wanted to be able to give something back to the LGBT community at the conclusion of our project. In the next section of the report, we feature some recommendations to policy makers and other interested persons and organisations. We suggest a number of viable ways to help the LGBT community inside Iran become more cohesive and visible, while maintaining privacy and security.

We did not know what we would take on as our *'giving back'* project when we initially started the research for this report, but it soon became glaringly apparent. Sexuality is such a taboo subject and LGBT Iranians are so absent from the public sphere that the Persian language has become acutely deficient of linguistic terms to describe their lifestyles, characteristics and struggles. Although it was not the principal aim of this research report, the interviews we conducted and our reviews of the existing literature revealed the shortcomings with the Persian language when it comes to discussing LGBT issues. We consulted a number of LGBT Iranians, activists and linguists and have put together a community-led online glossary of

terms called ‘*DegarVajeh*’, the launch of which coincides with the launch of this report. We will continue to strive to promote this initiative amongst Iranians in order to raise awareness of LGBT issues in the wider community.

Figure 4

The preliminary design for the *DegarVajeh* website, adhering to the objective to remain simple and fun



// We consulted with our Facebook focus group while planning the design of the online glossary. A number of linguists and activists also helped us to collate suitable words for the project’s launch. After much deliberation, *DegarVajeh* was selected as a suitable moniker for the project and all of our consultants were excited about the prospects it offered. The research team worked with the Small Media tech team to plan and design a simple, fun and interactive website that would encourage collaboration and contribution (see Figure 4). The site needed to be easy to maintain, inclusive, linked into social networks, and educational without being stale.

The box layout of the site is based on the principles ‘*share, learn, participate*’, which Small Media developed for *DegarVajeh*. The box on the left links *DegarVajeh* to social networks, the box in the middle provides a random word from the collection each time the page is refreshed, and the box on the right gives site users the option to contribute a word to the glossary. Along

the bottom of the page (above the grass), are the letters of the Iranian alphabet, which enable users to search through the database of pre-existing words.

The site is imbued with the rainbow colours of the gay rights movement, as these are also particularly resonant in the Iranian context. Each word in the glossary is linked to a *'share'* button facilitating its distribution on social networks. This will encourage site users to take the discussion and debate surrounding the issues raised by their visit to the glossary back to their own social spaces, in turn promoting an atmosphere of openness when it comes to gay issues.

Each new word to be added to the glossary is submitted alongside a meaning, a context of use, an example sentence, synonyms, a pronunciation guide and an indication of whether the word has a positive or negative connotation. The word is moderated before being added to the site. In addition to asking LGBT Iranians to contribute to the glossary, we also approached reputable linguists who agreed to participate on the grounds that their identity would be kept anonymous. They have contributed a number of Middle and Old Persian words that are no longer in use and are facing extinction. We opted to use Penglish (where Persian words are spelled out using the Latin alphabet) for the pronunciation guide, as none of our respondents were familiar with reading standardised phonetics.

// The aims of the glossary are to:

1. Combat the deficiency in the Persian language when it comes to discussing LGBT issues
2. Foster and promote discussions about the words and related issues in social spaces
3. Collate and archive words that may otherwise become extinct
4. Provide an up-to-date reference of slang words
5. Promote understanding of LGBT issues in the wider community
6. Target taboos surrounding specific words
7. Educate the general public about LGBT issues in an engaging/informing way

“Your site is really cool. It’s an innovative idea and it’s really helpful. A lot of people have heard all of these different words but they don’t know their correct meaning or how to use them. Even LGBTs themselves”

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1

// There are a number of different ways we can help the LGBT community of Iran and, with the help of some of our respondents, we have created a list of possible projects. While conducting the research for this report, we recognised a number of areas where charities and other vested individuals could step in and help Iran’s LGBT community through working with them to establish successful and empowering initiatives. In the text below, we present a number of potential initiatives and advise on the feasibility of and logic behind such projects.

A SECURE ONLINE PLATFORM FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

// LGBT Iranians need a secure platform over which to chat with each other. This online platform would need to be supported by a core group of *'trusted people'* and by well-known LGBT rights activists living outside Iran (for security reasons) who maintain close ties to the LGBT community inside Iran. It would need to be hosted outside Iran and this hosting would need to be both secure and flexible. The core group would add new members from their own networks. This online platform could adapt and evolve upon the facilities offered by pre-existing technologies, such as the internal networking capabilities available through Yammer for example. In order to ensure that members could trust each other there could be a star system (similar to the rating system on eBay) whereby users would gain stars according to their *'trustworthiness'* as recommended by their peers. In other words, the more people who *'verify'* a user, the more stars they get, the more they can be trusted and the more weighted the stars that they give other users become. New members would need to be verified by pre-existing members to gain access to secure areas. The platform would need to be as secure and as resilient against filtering as possible. The personal data of members would need to be highly protected and users should be encouraged to take tutorials in internet security, which are freely available online and can be sourced by Small Media for inclusion on the platform as well.

'COMING OUT' CAMPAIGN

// There is a real need for a project that encourages people for whom it is safe to do so to *'come out'* and publicly discuss their sexuality or their support for the LGBT community. LGBT Iranians in exile, who are beyond the reach of the repression of the Islamic Republic, and other well-known and famous Iranians who may or may not be LGBT, should express solidarity

with the LGBT rights movement in a public forum. The reception that singer Shohreh received when she supported the LGBT community shows demonstrates this need. Many LGBT Iranians in exile remain closeted because they fear repercussions for family members left behind in Iran. A 'coming out' campaign would help to reduce the associated social stigma and could lessen the taboos surrounding LGBT.

An interested organisation could sponsor the development of a website through which LGBT Iranians in exile, high profile non-Iranian LGBTs, and high profile non-LGBT Iranians, could deliver messages of solidarity and support for the community. The website, which would be interlinked with social networking platforms, would raise the visibility of the LGBT community and encourage a greater level of tolerance across society. This website could also include a number of 'how to' guides for its readers. For example, one such guide could advise on how to come out to your family, or how to react when someone comes out to you.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION

// One of the bloggers we spoke with suggested that a physical education initiative for LGBT Iranians would be of tremendous benefit. A charitable foundation could be established to support the implementation of such a programme in Iran or it could be supported by a pre-existing charity with an interest in supporting LGBT Iranians. The programme would need to be highly secretive and participants would be invited on an individual basis following a needs assessment. Selecting participants from an open call would pose unnecessary risks. Iranian LGBT rights groups could recommend participants for the programme based on needs assessments and by identifying at risk individuals through their day-to-day work in the LGBT

community. It would be safer for this programme to focus on the transgender community, however, due to the prevalence of transphobic behaviour in public spaces, special care would have to be taken in order to protect the identities of those involved.

One of our advisers told us that a physical education programme would need to focus on serving a larger goal. Self-defence classes, for example, can boost confidence, but the key is to empower individuals and raise self-awareness, and this will not happen unless the framework simultaneously reinforces a feeling of belonging and selfhood amongst participants. On the grounds that she remain anonymous, the same adviser said,

A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG LESBIANS

// LGBT Iranians are in need of a sense of belonging and lesbians are particularly excluded from mainstream society. LGBT rights activist and poet Saghi Ghahraman suggested that an online community for young lesbians could be established in order to encourage them to take part in social activities. A number of small Facebook collectives of lesbian Iranians have been established over the course of our research, but the platform is not secure enough for their needs and would not support a larger community without compromising on safety and security. Our study demonstrated that lesbians are far less visible and less active in the rights campaign than gay and transsexual Iranians.

Although the secure platform discussed in the first recommendation can serve this purpose and would, crucially, facilitate interaction between all subsets of the LGBT community, Small Media additionally recommends a closed and secure online training and mentoring platform for Iranian lesbians. This training platform would bring together a select group of powerful

role models who would mentor a core group of young lesbian women, help them to be more active in the wider community, and increase their visibility while maintaining personal and online security. Small Media has access to a platform that could be adapted to suit this purpose. A partner organisation could, with our help, find, gather, and fund the selected role models to mentor the women, and to create valuable and empowering content for dissemination across the platform,

“The real goal is empowerment. Empowerment has to do with the way one presents themselves. If one thinks of themselves as a ‘mistake’, as ‘sinful’, as deserving of punishment, as mentally ill, or as imperfect, then they are vulnerable to a wide variety of assault and attack - from siblings, peers, and strangers ... The other point that needs to be taught is awareness of ‘what is going on in the world around me’ ... When am I really at risk and when am I so used to thinking that I’m not safe that I assume I am at risk?”

A NOVEL IDEA FOR LGBT AUTHORS

// The LGBT authoring community in Iran needs our support. They need to be encouraged to write; their voices have the power to impress change upon the landscape of LGBT issues in Iran and pose a stark challenge to heteronormativity and patriarchy in Iran. Although the case of Ketabkhaneh⁸⁸ (discussed earlier in this report) is inspiring, there is much more to be done in terms of facilitating and supporting the publishing process for LGBT authors who, as we mentioned, would never dream of applying to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for permission to publish. Thus, our recommendation is two-fold. In partnership with Gilgamishan Publications, a publishing company or other interested individual/charity could fundraise to support Iran’s LGBT authors to ready their books for publication. The books could be printed for audiences in exile and converted

to e-book format for dissemination inside Iran. Selected books could also be translated into English and featured in LGBT bookstores in order to raise the visibility of Iran's LGBT community outside Iran and to foreign audiences.

CONCLUSION

// Although the primary goal of this report was to demonstrate the remarkable diversity in Iran's LGBT community, we consider the fact that we have probably planted more questions in your minds than we have given you answers to be an especially positive thing. In an environment such as that in Iran, where sexuality is so taboo, any and all related discussions that are brought into social spaces are intrinsically valuable.

In this report, we have presented a historical overview, a discussion of the legal frameworks that serve to repress LGBT individuals, and a number of unique and inspiring case studies that showcase unheard voices and untold stories. // We are indebted to those who chose to share their stories with us, and we respect the fact that it was not always easy for them. We do hope that this report provokes debate, and we hope to be involved in those ongoing discussions that will arise from such a study as this.

We are not claiming to be experts, nor are we claiming to know everything there is to know about LGBT rights in Iran. There are many other LGBT activists and organisations working closely with gay, lesbian, and transsexual Iranians both in exile and on the ground inside Iran who are far more knowledgeable. Nonetheless, this is a starting point, and we hope that other organisations will take up our invitation to get involved. As a humble beginning, we outlined several potential projects that supportive groups might embark on, and we are willing to act as advisers for anyone wishing to get involved.

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