

Investigating the Dynamics of the Iranian LGBT Community from Legal and Religious Perspectives

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Abstract:-Gender is one of the most important issues the lives of adolescents. It relates to sexual identity and role, sexual orientation, lust, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Gender affects people's thoughts, dreams, desires, beliefs, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. But gender is also affected by biological, psychological, social, economic, cultural, moral, legal, historical, religious and spiritual interactions. This is the first research conducted on LGBT people in Iran and adds to the existing literature on LGBT people by focusing on the residence of this community. This research integrates phenomenological, hermeneutic, postmodern and psychological approaches to provide a theoretical method appropriate for researching the LGBT experience, while, at the same time, demonstrating the researcher's perception of study criteria to preserve "objectivity". This study is highly complex as it views sexual orientation and gender-related ideas broadly as well as in private and public life. This study conducted in-depth interviews with about 300 LGBT people - 60% male and 40% female - in the three metropolises of Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan. This research investigates their challenges in this changing age in terms of gender relations and the quality of interactions from legal and religious perspectives, thus providing readers, universities, research centres, and public and social activists with systematic theoretical frameworks about LGBT people. The main objectives of this research are to understand the sentiments surrounding LGBT people by critically analysing their perspectives and to examine the challenges these people experience when living in religious, class-based, traditional and patriarchal societies that reject LGBT identities.

Keywords: LGBT, LGBTQ+, religion, Iran, legal, homosexual, sexual orientation, gay, lesbian

1. Introduction

In Iran, the LGBT community must remain concealed at present. Within the last decade, children and young people have reportedly been punished and even executed for performing homosexual acts. Unlike in many Western countries, the Muslim world has only begun to make changes towards acceptance of LGBT people. For young people, the need to conceal their identities while struggling to know and understand them puts them under even greater pressures from family, friends and both religious and non-religious acquaintances.

Gender, sex and sexual desire are fluid concepts that are part of the very cornerstone of human relations. As a biological characteristic, a baby's sex is usually the first question a woman encounters when pregnant.

Sex refers to the physical or biological differences between males, females and transgender people, which include the primary characteristics of the reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social and cultural characteristics that arise from one's sex. While sex is a biological designation based on anatomy and genetics, gender is a social construct that refers to cultural identities and norms associated with being masculine or feminine. Western and many other societies have traditionally recognised only two sexes: male and female. However, as Beemyn and Rankin[1] maintain, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender, with sex being a biological classification and gender being a social and cultural concept [1].

We now understand that one's sex - characterised by one's biology - is not always consistent with one's gender. Thus, the terms "sex" and "gender" are not interchangeable. Accordingly, the "sacred affair" may be distinguished from a "blasphemous act" by history, traditions, established norms and the omnipresent power of religion. A blasphemous act is often any sexual relations existing outside of this recommended social norm (men's relations with women). However, the classification of LGBT people undermines all these norms, including the "bipolar" and "binary" system.

Most gender scholars argue that the few references made to homosexuality in sacred texts have given rise to modern homophobic prejudices. Sullivan and Vedarski[2] (p. 104) maintain that

the Bible's references to homosexuality underlie modern homophobia because most homosexuality and homosexual conduct opponents refer to the basic principle that the Bible considers homosexuality as sacrilegious and forbidden.

For the leaders of most major faiths, there is one issue where they tend to converge: viewing same-sex or sexual minority relationships as going against religious teachings on marriage, family and morality. Most religious authorities perceive same-sex attraction and relationships as contradictory to their doctrines. Klassen, Williams and Levitt[3] posit that religious perceptions have culminated in fear of homosexuality or any other sexual orientation labelled "deviant".

This study aims to explore the experiences of LGBT youth from religious families. As religious communities have historically taken restrictive views of sexuality and gender, LGBT individuals within faith traditions often face rejection and pressure to conform. The experiences of LGBT youth from religious families deserve scrutiny in order to better understand the challenges they face and how communities can become more supportive environments where all youth can thrive.

Same-sex or homosexual relationships and attractions have existed across cultures and societies throughout history. This phenomenon has always been a part of society in many cultures. Various social approaches have been pursued by scholars to same-sex relationships over time and in different places. Some of these

perspectives embrace and expect men's same-sex relations, while others consider "homosexuality" a great "sin", calling for its repression through police and judicial measures. In other cases, in some religious societies, LGBT persons are sentenced to death. The way different cultures approach this phenomenon depends on how they view it and how they work out their attitudes accommodate it.

The term "homosexual" was first coined in 1869. Until then, homosexuality was not considered to be a distinct orientation. At that time, this sexual orientation, which was newly named, began to emerge, founded on the premise that one's sexual attraction to one's own sex was an inherent characteristic that could not be removed from one's personality.

Contemporary views of relationships between people of the same sex or Sexual minority have been influenced by a range of historical and contextual factors. These include religious doctrines, legal frameworks, medical and psychological understandings of sexuality, as well as wider social and cultural norms. In many countries where people strictly abide by Christian and Islamic measures, same-sex relations is forbidden. Throughout much of early Christian history in Europe, same-sex relationships appear to have been more accepted or overlooked by the church. However, over time, especially from the late Middle Ages onward, hostility and condemnation of same-sex or Sexual minority intimacy began to emerge within religious and secular institutions. By the mid-20th century, discriminatory and restrictive attitudes toward people in same-sex relationships had become entrenched across European religious and social landscapes. During this period, same-sex relationships and behaviours that contravened prevailing sexual norms were heavily censured within religious and social institutions.

Given the religious restrictions, it is unsurprising that same-sex relationships have traditionally been viewed negatively in many Muslim communities. Opposition to same-sex relationships is found in key Islamic texts and legal rulings, including the Quran, Sharia law, and hadith which generally take restrictive stances.

The rejection of same-sex or Sexual minority practice and the LGBT community in most Islamic societies is evident, as they seek to direct the thinking and conduct of millions of religious people, especially children and youth. Religion constitutes the very "essence" of Muslim identity; thus, the Islamic approach to homosexuality is critical. That approach is more than religious guidance and, in principle, forms the cornerstone of political institutions. This is because religion, along with social traditions and customs (both of which are influenced by religion), enjoys the moral authority to affect social views and conduct, particularly in marriage, family life and educational affairs. Islamic societies' views on same-sex or homosexual intimacy are clear and categorical: "homosexuality is heinous".

Religious belief serves as a strong force and a determining factor in obstructing the social acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Currently, Iranians view homosexuality as a sin and believe transgenderism to be a "disease" - a view that often overshadows the lives of Iranian LGBT persons. However, the Quran

does not explicitly refer to transgender people, while, surprisingly, the Iranian Islamic system facilitates transgenderism.

In 1979, Iran adopted Islamic law under Article 2 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whereas the Iranian legal system draws upon the French civil-law system. The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is made up of the Assembly of the Experts, the Supreme Leader of Iran (Valy-e-Faghih), the Executive Power (the Government), the Legislature (Islamic Parliament and the Guardian Council), and the Judiciary Power.

Iran's Constitution considers homosexuality illegal. Criminal laws are founded on interpretations from Islam that prohibit homosexual acts. According to these laws, drawing upon Islamic codes, homosexuality is illegal and includes the punishment of one hundred lashes or death. Punishment is more lenient if they confess - punishment in that case may be 31 to 70 lashes - while if they confess to having committed the act a few times and there is proof of this, it will be regarded as a criminal offense punished by one hundred lashes or even death.

However, some people may confess under torture, which is legally questionable, because Article 241 of the Islamic Penal Code states that

in the absence of legal evidence substantiating the incidence of the offence of an unchaste act and at the accused's denial, it is forbidden to investigate and interrogate the latter to uncover the matters concealed from the public.

The Iranian Islamic Penal Code was revised in 2012 and 2013; however, few changes were made to the homosexuality laws. These few changes only apply to the active party (penetrator role), who will receive the death penalty only if he has raped the victim or committed adultery. Another scenario resulting in a death penalty is when the perpetrator is a non-Muslim and the victim is a Muslim. Note 1 of Article 233 of this bill envisages the death sentence for the former. These laws, along with the legislator's reaffirmation in the new Islamic Penal Code bill, come at a time when Iranian officials have denied the existence of homosexuality in the country - death penalties are executed under the title of "sodomy-rape", a kind of rape. Faraz Sanei, a Human Rights Watch researcher stated that, between 2005 and 2010, no one was sentenced to death solely on the grounds of same-sex intimacy[4].

The old Islamic Penal Code envisages that no one could ever feel they are LGBT for their entire life, so gay men and lesbians are perceived as having entered sinful sexual intercourse for "unknown reasons". The old Islamic Penal Code perceived a "homosexual" to be a person in action, and, in this connection, the important change made to the new Islamic Penal Code was the addition of an article stating,

Male homosexuality other than sodomy and intercourse sex including kissing and touching out of lust renders in *ta'zir* punishment (i.e. discretionary correction) commensurate to the offence and up to 74 lashes.

In fact, according to the older version, "the active (male) will be subjected to the death penalty in all cases if he is not under the legal age." However, this

limitation of “only” up to 74 lashes for underage people, as set by the older version of the law, has been removed in the new Penal Code.

Iran’s Islamic Penal Code provides the death penalty for such cases as a permanent warning, so that if a man plays a “passive” role in a same-sex or sexual minority relationship, he may also face the death penalty. The “active” partner (active penetrator) will be sentenced to death under certain conditions; otherwise, he receives up to one hundred lashes. Thus, Iranian men who have sex with other men or women with other women may be sentenced to death or lashing.

In Iran, laws on same-sex-attracted people differ from laws on transgender people. Historical discourses in this area indicate that there are religious discourses, some followers of which seek to consider their transgender identities in the form of an Islamic norm. In 1967, Imam Khomeini described Islamic jurisprudence as a guide based on historical experience. His book, *Tahrir al-Wasila*, was an important philosophical document initially aimed at his followers, but it later entered national policy-making when he became the supreme leader. This jurisprudence recognised the rights of transgender people to undergo a gender reassignment, a medical and surgical procedures that alter a person’s biological sex characteristics to match their gender identity. . His leading jurisprudence suggests that “Al-Zahir or the first appearance renders the sex change not fully prohibited and it is recognised the right to undergo sex change.” A case study of Ayatollah Khomeini’s and Sheikh al-Tantawi’s *fatwas*[5] states that The Islamic Republic of Iran, following Thailand, has the highest number of gender reassignment procedures in the world.

The Iranian administrative system often stands tough on transgender people, and this is mainly seen at various government, social and familial levels. This issue has been noted in many ethnographic studies, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi’s *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, published in 2013[6]. This study shows how sexual- and gender-based minorities in Iran have sought to take refuge in the Iranian administrative system out of “need” rather than because of “rights”. This means that transgender people have taken advantage of the inconsistent Iranian administrative system to help promulgate several laws that not only make it possible to access medical sources, but also help create a context for having a more tolerable life in the LGBT community. As Najmabadi found, sexual- and gender-based minorities in Iran collaborate with the Welfare Organisation and other agencies of government to make the changes they need, rather than trying to change the law through, for example, the Islamic Parliament.

In 2010, the Social Harms Office, affiliated with the Welfare Organisation, responded to the lobbying and strategic activism for transgender people and amended one reason for exemption from military service from “mental disorder” to “hormonal disorder”. The “hormonal disorder” inserted on their military service card as the reason for their exemption could reduce discrimination against

transgender female job-seekers and mean that they are not called in for compulsory army service. Najmabadi elaborated[6]:

For medical and legal authorities, sex change is a treatment for morbid perversion, sometimes describing it as a religiously and legally confirmed option for heterosexuals with same-sex or homosexual desire or similar behaviours.

Concerning the LGBT community, the legal system is irregular, harassing and sometimes paradoxical, for it does not recognise same-sex or Sexual minority attraction. The Judiciary does not recognize any concept of a sexual orientation other than an orientation towards the opposite sex, and thus, legally refutes homosexual or bisexual relationships, calling gay men and lesbians “the ones who engage in homosexual behaviour”. For many LGBT people, these laws and the subsequent punishments could have adverse and ridiculous impacts on the private sexual behaviours of two consenting, adult LGBT people.

In her second report on the human-rights situation in Iran, UN Special Rapporteur Esmā Jahangir[7] gathered data during the period 1 January to 30 June from several civil experts, including the Abdul Rahman Boroumand Foundation, to elaborate on the “grave human rights challenges in Iran”. In her report, Ms Jahangir criticised the Iranian judiciary and condemned the growing number of executions related to same-sex intimacy, which Iran sees as illegal. She reported on the tough conditions the LGBT community is struggling with in Iran.

Following the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian judicial system substantially changed, part of which was due to the inclusion of the Sharia in the Constitution. In Iran, the Islamic Sharia is influenced by religious governance, which greatly contributes to the legal process. As a result of this law, civil and criminal law changed, and family law, including marriage, divorce, custody and many civil and female-related rights went through substantial changes.

Following the Islamic Revolution, the Penal Code also changed. The Islamic Parliament revised the Islamic Penal Code in 2010, and, in May 2013, the Guardian Council, which is more authoritative than parliament, adopted the new law, officially called the Islamic Penal Code. The new Islamic Penal Code envisages a variety of punishments. Accordingly, so-called *hudud* punishments include punishments that pertain to “God’s legal right”. Here, the sentence is already clear and the court cannot make another ruling. In *ta’zir* punishments, the judge has broader discretion.

After the Islamic Revolution, the new Islamic Penal Code, directly and indirectly, transformed the lives of LGBT people. In this context, Chapter 2 of Book 2 (Hudud), Section 2 (Sodomy Hudud), Articles 108 to 241 explicate the provisions set for heterosexual relations in the legal system. According to these provisions, the orientations of LGBT people are not recognised nor endorsed. They face various types of punishments, some of which are already provided for in the articles set by the Islamic Penal Code. Some Islamic Penal Code clauses that affect LGBT people are as follows.

- Article 233: Sodomy is the penetration of male genitals the size of foreskin into another male's anus. It is anal sexual intercourse.
- Article 234: The hudud punishment for the active sodomite, in cases of rape, or having a wife, is death, otherwise, one hundred lashes. The hudud of sodomy for the passive (with a wife or not) is death in any case.

Note 1: If the active is a non-Muslim and the passive a Muslim, the hudud punishment is death for the doer.

Note 2: Hudud for the male with a wife is death as stated previously, as the man is mature and can have sex with the mature wife whenever he wants.

- Article 235: Intercruralex, also known as coitus interfemoris, thigh sex, and interfemoral sex, is a type of non-penetrative sex where the penis is placed between the receiving partner's thighs and friction is generated via thrusting. Intercrural occurs when genitals are laid between a male's thighs or the hips.

Note: Penetration no more than penis foreskin/hood.

- Article 236: In intercrural sex, the hudud for the active and passive is one hundred lashes, not distinguishing between the male with or without a wife or rape or non-rape.

Note: If the active participant is a non-Muslim and the passive participant a Muslim, the hudud punishment is the death penalty for the doer.

- Article 237: Male homosexuality for non-sodomy and intercrural sex such as kissing and touching out of lust results in a sentence of seventy-four lashes of the sixth degree.

Note 1: This provision also holds for females.

Note 2: This provision does not include the cases legally subject to hudud.

- Article 238: Lesbianism, also called sapphism or female homosexuality, is the tendency of a human female to be emotionally and usually sexually attracted to other females. It occurs when a female places her genitals on the genitals of her same-sex or homosexual partner.
- Article 239: Lesbianism hudud is one hundred lashes.
- Article 240: The hudud for lesbianism does not differentiate between the active and the passive, Muslim and non-Muslim, with or without a husband, rape and non-rape.
- Article 241: In the absence of legal evidence on the incidence of an unchaste act and the accused's denial, any investigation into the affair is prohibited. Cases of perpetration with violence, reluctance, harassment, kidnapping or deception are subjected to the rape case and are excluded from this provision.

The above articles point to the conclusion that the new Islamic Penal Code criminalises gay and lesbian relationships and sets out punishments, including a hundred lashes for consensual sexual intercourse between two women (Article 239) and the death penalty for consensual sexual penetration between two men (Article 234). Also, the Code criminalises similar conducts such as touching and kissing

between two people of the same biological sex, for which it calls for up to 74 lashes. Articles 232 and 233 of the Islamic Penal Code sentence the “passive” partner in consensual sexual intercourse between two men to death, while the “active” partner, according to the law, is only punishable by a hundred lashes, if he is a single Muslim. Non-Muslim married men who engage in consensual sexual intercourse are sentenced to death.

Interestingly, Chapter 4 of Book 2 of the Islamic Penal Code, which encompasses all types of sexual offenses, remains completely silent about raping married men. Rape is a common offence, but sexual conduct outside of marriage may also be punishable by death if there are witnesses. This is the rationale behind stating that two consenting, adult men who engaged in sexual intercourse committed an offence and risked their lives.

According to the new Islamic Penal Code, engaging in a homosexual act, if proven, means that the death penalty is probable, which helps understand why many LGBT people, cognisant of the laws, are living in states of anxiety and fear.

As in other Abrahamic religions, Islamic laws such as the Quran, the Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH), religious narrations and *fatwas* by religious leaders prevail over sexual orientation, all reconfirming the man-woman sexual relationship norm.

In Islam, religious discourse about LGBT matters concerns, primarily, sexual activity between men, and few hadiths (prophetic narrations) cite homosexual behaviour between women. Many lawyers disproportionately suggest that there is no hudud punishment for lesbians, for this is not considered to be adultery as women lack male genitals and cannot do the penetration. Having said this, they are physically incapable of committing adultery; however, deserving the ta'zir punishment, because this act is sinful.[8]

Iranian history has provided few examples of punishment for lesbians; however, the author of *Tabari History* provides an example of the execution of two lesbian slave girls at the Al-Hadi shrine. This is an example that shows the actions of the ruling caliph.

On the other hand, some of the Abrahamic religions believe homosexuality to be an unforgivable sin and oppose the union between same-sex individuals. This piles up pressure on lesbians because their feelings, desires and emotions are seen as unnatural and deviant.

The homophobic model introduced by Islam endorses normative heterosexuality, virtually ignoring lesbians, who are forced to conceal their identities while renouncing their sexual orientations. The way they live as Muslim lesbians causes an intersection at which religion and sexual desire collide; meanwhile, Islamic religious homophobia distinguishes these two components, thus banning these women from exploring and expressing their sexual desires. Many of them seek to adapt to these conditions by living secret lives. Even those who are members of the Muslim LGBT protection group (Faith Group) are grappling with myriad problems. Tough and biased religious approaches to homosexuality do not help religious beliefs and sexual orientation to be reconciled.

The Well of Loneliness, by English author Radclyffe Hall, first published by Jonathan Cape in 1928, recounts the story of the tormented life of Stephen Gordon, an English wealthy woman of the upper class whose same-sex or homosexual desires were clear from an early age. This novel portrays lesbianism as a natural and God-given situation, while making a specific demand: "Give us the right to life." This demand also holds of Muslim lesbians in Iran, who are suffering from sexual violence, demands for obedience to the patriarchal order, women's relative marginalisation and accumulated pressures to marry. The influence of Islam, which greatly contributes to shaping the identities of individuals in their daily lives and personal development, can be a source of limitation for Iranian lesbians, who are not allowed to express their true identities.

2. Materials and Methods

To understand same-sex or sexual minority exual minority relationships, the root causes of such desires must be investigated. Scientific discussion about the roots of same-sex intimacy and investigations of sexual desire is a complex subject that is outside the scope of this research. There are two main theories about the causes of same-sex desire:

1. Same-sex or homosexual intimacy is primarily affected by genetic and biological factors, which are regarded as a congenital tendency. Simply put, people are born "gay" or "lesbian; and Same-sex intimacy primarily results from psychological and environmental influences as well as early experiences.

To sum up, there are probably several factors that cause same-sex intimacy. The first sexual encounter usually occurs during high-school years, i.e. at ages 15 or 16, although it also occurs, in some cases, during primary school. These relationships lead to more serious sexual interactions.

Adolescence involves considerable changes to various aspects of intellectual maturity, immense psycho-social development, and several physical developments resulting from neurological and hormonal processes, all of which are intertwined in a process called "puberty". Puberty is associated with heightened levels of sex hormones. During puberty, the body secretes hormones that cause the ovaries to produce oestrogen. The most characteristic physical changes during puberty result from the considerable impacts of hormones. Secondary signs of sexual changes (for example, breast formation, testicular and penile growth and genital hair), physical changes and fertility are all signs of this process[9]. The pressures of social and religious norms on LGBT youth are heavy additions to the normal pressures of puberty.

The purpose of this study was to gain an overview of the Iranian LGBT community's dynamics. It uses fieldwork to further investigations[10], gathering some 400 personal narratives of biases and various forms of discrimination LGBT people have experienced. Unlike most studies in this area, the present study also examines the root causes of fear and repression of the LGBT community.

LGBT groups in Iran are clandestine, making it very difficult to identify and approach them and, consequently, to gain their trust. One of the reasons for this mistrust is the lack of knowledge about sexual orientation in Iran. Scant research has been carried out on Muslim LGBT communities. The main reason is the problems and obstacles facing those who study and research taboo subjects. Also, as Murray[11] states, there is a collective culture of renunciation of homosexuality in Muslim societies.

Critically, this study sought to gather data on the LGBT community in Iran in a systematic way. Data were analysed using integrated methods commonly applied in comprehensive and sensitive research. The methods include qualitative, quantitative, grounded theory and snowball sampling. It should be noted that, while these methods are presented here in a particular order, they are rare, even if they were sequential.

Using integrated methods has always been an adaptive way of analysing data, with sampling and data collection having a continuous form, each depending on the other. Of course, this requires analysing every stage of the research process. After data were collected from the participants, which was done throughout the interview process, they were immediately analysed. Strauss and Corbin[12] identify five objectives for coding processes. These stages of grounded theory are:

1. Developing a theory and testing it;
2. Providing researchers with analytical tools to manage a volume of raw data;
3. Helping analysts consider other meanings of a phenomenon;
4. Systematic and creative coding; and
5. Identifying, producing, and linking concepts constituting a theory.

Since data collection and analysis are primarily interpretive, this process includes certain steps[13]. The first step is open coding, in which data from the initial interviews are classified, and involves subgroups, features and dimensions (scope and differences in each category). Open coding includes labelling concepts, and defining and developing categories based on their properties and dimensions. In this study, these features and their dimensions can be defined outside of data collection.

The second step is axial coding, which is based on grounded theory. In contrast to open coding, for which the data are broken into discrete parts, when axial coding one begins to draw connections between codes[14] (p. 102). For axial coding, the codes developed in open coding are organised.[12] (p. 116) With axial coding in qualitative research, the codes and the underlying data are read over to discover how the codes can be grouped into categories. A category could be created based on an existing code or a new, more abstract category could be developed that encompasses several different codes[12] (p. 116).

The third step is selective coding. This is the last step in [grounded theory](#), where all categories are connected around one core category. Selective coding connects categories that were developed from the qualitative data in previous coding cycles, such as axial coding. In doing so, one defines a unified theory around the

research. The core category developed in selective coding may come from elevating one category from the axial coding stage, or it may be a new category that is derived from the other categories. The core category ultimately represents the central thesis of the work[12] (p. 143 & 146).

3. Results

3.1. *Religious belief and violence against LGBT communities*

Considering the secret lives of LGBT people and the understandable fear of their sexual identities being exposed, this research cannot claim that the sample population represents the general LGBT community. However, the data reveal realities that overshadow the Iranian LGBT community. This study uses field techniques and purposive interviews to estimate the number of LGBT people in Iran by concentrating on the three major cities of Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan.

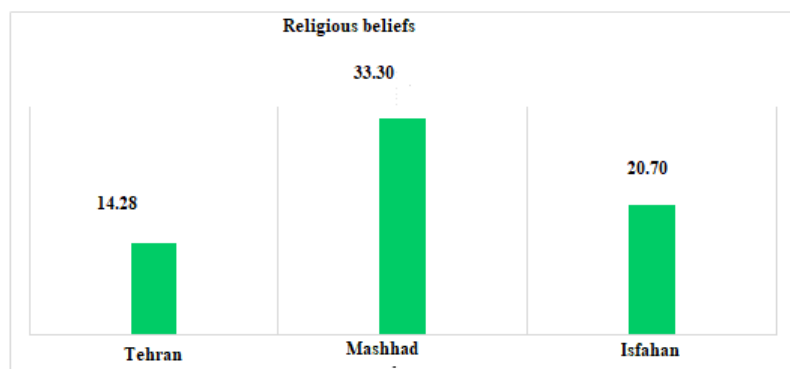


Figure 1. Percentage of religious beliefs in the sample population.

Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of religious beliefs in the sample population in Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan. According to the figures, 14.28% of LGBT people in Tehran, 33.3% in Mashhad and 20.7% in Isfahan have faith in religious concepts such as God and ritual ceremonies such as prayer and fasting. These data suggest that LGBT people in Mashhad have stronger religious beliefs, likely because development and socialisation under religious rituals in this city are much greater. Isfahan and Tehran tend to be more “modern” with lower levels of religious belief. As stated earlier, many LGBT people have faith in religious matters, just like other people in the region. Some reported that they have taken part in cultural and religious ceremonies, while others have attended religious rituals like Ashura. In Iran, the law, religion and custom are the three “forces” that dictate how the individual should behave, and all three have opposed same-sex or sexual minority intimacy. These three forces operate separately, collectively and simultaneously. So, Iranian LGBT people cannot expose their identities like their counterparts in other countries. However, signs of recognition and tolerance of same-sex intimacy are beginning to emerge. In other words, this very specific lifestyle is growing slowly as part of the larger society. Youth demonstrate a little more tolerance of same-sex or homosexual intimacy, and more people feel confident enough to identify themselves as LGBT in places they feel protected.

In the pre-modern moral and legal system, sexual relationships were often seen as legitimate only as a means for reproduction; any sexual act not leading to reproduction was considered immoral. For example, masturbation and having anal sex with women, using contraceptives and having sex with non-religious people were considered religiously perverted and sinful.

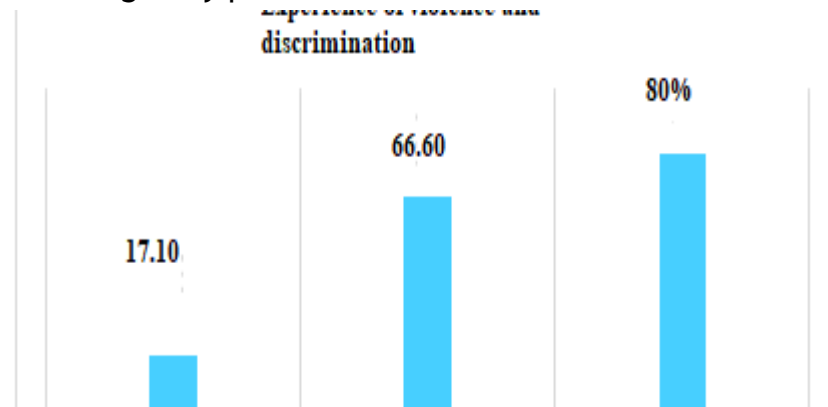


Figure 2. Percentages of experiences of violence and discrimination in the sample population.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentages of violence, discrimination and humiliation LGBT people in Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan have experienced. Those in Isfahan (80%) had experienced the most violence and discrimination, followed by those in Mashhad (66.6%) and Tehran (17.1%). Mashhad and Isfahan were found to be more traditional and religious compared to Tehran. Thus, in those areas, homosexuality is seen as a deviation and anomaly, and it is no surprise to see these two cities having the higher rates of violence against LGBT people.

Opponents of same-sex intimacy view it as moral corruption or a “deviancy”. Homophobia and stigmatisation in these societies are major causes of violence and discrimination.

3.2. *Research results in Muslim countries*

While Muslim countries, to a large extent, prohibit same-sex or homosexual intimacy, the LGBT community enjoys more respect and tolerance in most Western societies, although at times they are still stigmatised. In the Middle East and the rest of Muslim society, approaches to the LGBT community have not changed as they have around the world. The Middle East continues to resist change the most. In many areas, it is forbidden to even talk about homosexuality, making it very difficult for LGBT support groups to make changes. A review by the Pew Research Centre on global approaches to homosexuality found that, compared to 80% of Canadians and British, less than 5% of those surveyed in Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestine and Tunisia believe that society should decriminalise homosexuality. Some of the Muslim countries that show more flexibility towards LGBT people are Malaysia (9%), Turkey (9%) and Lebanon (18%); in these countries, Islam seems to have a weaker role in citizens’ political and social lives .

In Muslim societies, judicial and extra-judicial measures adopted against homosexuality send a clear message to society that homosexuality is wrong, perverted, illegal, and thus punishable. The Islamic Republic of Iran, under the Islamic Sharia, takes a tough legal stance on homosexuality, adopting the death penalty and lashes as punishments. According to the Iranian Islamic Penal Code, “When two men not having blood relations are found to be nude under a covering, both shall be punished by up to 99 lashes (discretionary punishment)” and “when two women not having blood relations are found to be nude under a covering, both shall be punished by less than 100 lashes (discretionary punishment)”. Repeating the act also results in *ta'zir* punishment - a third-degree offense of 100 lashes. However, “When one kisses the latter out of caprice, he shall receive up to 60 lashes.” Additionally, same-sex relations without anal penetration could result in 100 lashes; anal penetration could result in the death penalty. Under the Islamic Penal Code, people shall receive punishment for homosexuality only when they confess four times, or four virtuous Muslim men testify they have seen the sexual relationship between them.

It is also clear that no Muslim country provides social or legal environments to support the LGBT community. One would argue that a social support mechanism to address this is lacking, and the need for Islamic support organisations to support the psychological and social well-being of LGBT people is strongly felt.

The situation for the Iraqi LGBT community sharply deteriorated following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Islamic groups emerged out of this political turmoil to target and kill as many as 200 LGBT people in 2012 alone. These groups are now working with the Iraqi Government to fight ISIS.

Since its creation, ISIS has persecuted religious minorities, as well as women and individuals whose identities or lifestyles are not consistent with the group's rigid and fanatical ideologies. Various levels of violence, extreme isolation and deliberate social stigmatisation are always destructive. In areas controlled by the Islamic State, militias have issued rulings against homosexual behaviour and flashy hairstyles, promising to execute anyone arrested on sodomy charges. In just one day, ISIS killed nine men and a 15-year-old boy in a Syrian city for being gay. ISIS's show trials ruled that gay sex receives the death penalty and savage punishment. This is only one of the examples of ISIS's abuse and its social and religious prejudices against gay people. This trend continued until 2017.

However, in recent years, ISIS's public displays of violence in Syria, which was a hostile environment for people who identified as LGBT even before their presence, has received the attention of the international community.

Disregarding and despite limited local efforts, no sign of change to the social or legal status of Egyptian LGBT people can be seen on the horizon. In Lebanon, the establishment of LGBT advocacy organisations is a major step in the fight for social and legal rights, which has brought about changes in attitudes. This change is a product of socio-political factors that have helped create new orientations in Lebanon. Although same-sex intimacy is prohibited in most Muslim countries, there

are some exceptions, too, with a few Muslim-majority countries (such as Jordan) legalising homosexuality; however, even in these countries, LGBT people receive little legal protection and they fear more aggravated punishments.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, has a vibrant bisexual cultural tradition widely tolerated by the public. Homosexuality and gay sex are not illegal in Indonesia. As observed above, surprisingly, transgender men and women are being recognised in many Islamic cultures around the world. The idea of a man or woman who considers himself/herself/themselves a member of the opposite biological sex is more acceptable than that of a person who has a sexual desire for someone of their own sex.

However, hopes for more changes are diminishing, though some measures have been taken to facilitate the lives of transgender people in Iran and Egypt. In 1988, a sex transition was declared acceptable under Islamic law by thinkers of the Egyptian Al-Azhar University, the world's oldest Islamic university. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964 gave a *fatwa* in the book *Tahrir al-Wasila* to decriminalise transgenderism, while the Shiite jurisprudence also determined criteria for the person's new identity and religious duties, in addition to recognising their transition. The premise which explains this apparent disparity between the tolerance shown to transgender people and the intolerance of same-sex practices is that a man is born transgender, whereas homosexuality is supposedly a choice. Homosexuality is thus believed to be a sin. However, many transgender Muslims are still suffering from physical and verbal violence and social and cultural rejection in their communities following their transitions. Many of these victims of discrimination cannot escape to another country to remain anonymous.

Activism for LGBT people in Lebanon has led to the establishment of organisations such as Helem, a progressive LGBT group in the Arab world, which provides LGBT people with health and legal services. Its mission is to lead a non-violent struggle for the liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other persons with non-conforming sexualities and/or gender identities (LGBTQIA+) in Lebanon and the MENA region from all sorts of violations of their individual and collective civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Helem is a well-established and influential entity in Lebanon that regularly hosts events on LGBT issues and even organises street protests against violence directed at the LGBT community in Lebanon. However, while Beirut is more liberal compared to its neighbouring cities and countries, it is still less tolerant of LGBT issues compared to Western societies. Services provided by Helem have only supported a limited number of individuals, usually from wealthier classes of society, while ignoring the marginalised and excluded. For example, scholars such as Massad have argued that Helem is a foreign entity and that organisations backed by foreign money, such as OLGA and Helem, seek to create gay communities in Lebanon by promoting sexual identities as adopted in Western society. According to him, homosexual behaviour is a problem, thus giving rise to interventions to endorse these communities.

This issue has also attracted the attention of the Iraqi and Arab media. In Baghdad, for example, Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite cleric, publicly endorsed a humane approach to LGBT people, stating they should not be treated with violence. Since clerics reserve a moral right to intervene in all matters, including all political and social matters, it should be noted that Iraqi religious figures are the most influential people guiding the public opinion in this regard. Ayatollah Sadr's statement became controversial, for it contradicted the position of other clerics and religious entities, like other Shi'ite thinkers in Iraq and Iran. Clerics in both countries have prohibited homosexuality in Islam, arguing it contradicts Islamic precepts; however, there are differences of opinion as to how to approach it.

Most Iraqis condemn same-sex intimacy, but they do not advocate violence against LGBT people. Iraqis and Lebanese laws have not specified punishments for same-sex intimacy.

Iran is one of seven countries in the world that still executes people who commit homosexual acts. Iran also has the highest number of executions, relative to population size, compared to other countries. In absolute terms, only China has carried out more executions than Iran. In 2009, the Iranian judiciary executed 388 people, with the number of executions sharply rising from 2010 to 2014, totalling at least 3,242 in this period.

Despite its accession to human-rights treaties, Iran executed eight adolescents in 2007, and from 2008 to 2009 it was the only country that continued to execute children in violation of its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2013 and 2014, at least 11 executions of children were carried out in Iran - which only included the ones made public.

On August 6, 2014, two men, Abdullah Ghevami Chahzan Jiri and Salman Ghanbari Chahzan Jiri, were hanged in southern Iran for alleged sodomy. It is not clear whether they were executed for being gay or not, as there were conflicting reports. One source said they were gay, and another wrote that their "offence" was not clear; however, this source still rebuked them as "perverted offenders". In 2011, three men were hanged in Iran after being convicted of homosexuality. These individuals, called only by their initials, were executed in southwestern Iran in the city of Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan province. A judicial official told the public gathering that the three convicts were sentenced to death for unchaste acts against the Islamic law and "evil deeds". The Norwegian Human Rights Organisation in Norway said that the men had committed "sodomy" (sexual penetration between two men). In 2007, it was reported that twenty offenders had been executed in Tehran for various crimes, including rape and sodomy. No further details were made available to the public.

In 2005, media outlets widely reported the execution of two teenage boys, Mahmoud Askari and Ayaz Marhouni. They were hanged in public for complicity in sodomy and rape, and their execution images were widely shared on the Internet. The two were children at the time the crime took place, and one of them was said to be a child even at the time the sentence was enforced. It is still not clear

whether the two were executed for being gay or not. The charges upon which they were executed are still unclear. Similarly, an adolescent boy of 13, named Moloudzadeh, was executed for sodomy and raping three teenage boys. This is despite the fact that all the witnesses retracted their allegations and Moloudzadeh retracted his confession.

The new Islamic Penal Code targets those whose sexual orientations are perceived to disrupt social norms, and this is seen as a reason for the Government to “cleanse offenders” from the earth. Laws on sodomy in many criminal codes are intertwined with heinous crimes such as rape, sexual assault, adultery and child sexual abuse, confusing the public and causing anger. Child sexual abuse and rape are shameful and horrific offenses, but homosexuality is not so. However, as previously mentioned, same-sex intimacy has always been associated with pederasty and sexual perversion, which is rejected by societies and punished by laws.

In 2010, Human Rights Watch released a report [15] on the situation for LGBT and other sexual minorities in Iran. The report said that, because the courts investigations of “moral cases” are not made public, it is difficult to determine how many people have been executed for homosexuality. Amnesty International estimates that some 5,000 people have been executed for homosexuality since 1979.[16] Of course, this claim is difficult to substantiate due to a lack of official evidence.

The Committee on Cultural, Social, and Economic Rights, along with the Committee on Human Rights, has frequently called on all member states, including Iran, to abolish laws criminalising homosexuality. Iran is a member of the ICESCR and ICCPR. The terms and obligations set out by these international instruments are clear. However, the Iranian judiciary has responded by using the current Penal Code to criminalise homosexuality.

Many problems LGBT people are facing in Iran are legal, and if their rights are violated, limited legal assistance will be provided to them. Indeed, the laws themselves are against their rights - inherently discriminatory, bigoted and deeply in conflict with Iran’s vulnerable sections of society - and in violation of Iran’s international obligations.

Some LGBT people, and especially those with higher educations and living in larger cities, are aware of the stigma and prejudice against them, as well as the heavy punishment that awaits them if their sexual identity is exposed. This portrays a bleak image of life for LGBT people, who live with discrimination and intolerance. A review of the situation of same-sex or sexual minority attracted and bisexual people in neighbouring countries can potentially provide a broader perspective on possible legal reforms and solutions to face these social challenges in Iran. In Turkey, for example, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1858 and legal discrimination was restricted. One of the greatest achievements of the Turkish LGBT community, social activists and NGOs was the LGBT parade in Istanbul, which saw Turkey become the first Muslim country to host such an event. Iranian LGBT

people participated in some of these parades in Istanbul, Amsterdam and Stockholm in 2015 and 2016.

Despite this promising public response, Turkish society still has a negative attitude toward LGBT people. A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre suggested that only 9% of people in Turkey were accepting of homosexuality in their society, with most Turkish people strongly opposing homosexuality. This opposition has also been seen in Russia and Lebanon. Same-sex intimacy is not a crime, they state, but 80% and 74% of people in each country, respectively, believe that society should not accept same-sex intimacy.

Despite legal reforms, which are undoubtedly a big step, social challenges remain an obstacle to overcoming the difficulties that LGBT people regularly face.

4. Discussion

While advocates for the LGBT community around the world have called for more tolerance, Iran is one of the countries still resisting change in this regard. In some areas of Iran, same-sex or homosexual intimacy as a subject of discussion is thoroughly rejected, as no LGBT support groups are allowed to form and no initiatives are made accordingly. Religious foundations in Iran constitute a legal and political “meta-structure” defined by traditional Shiite jurisprudence. This ideological system seldom allows other voices to be heard and maintains a tough religious stance on the matter[17].

As a traditional society, Iran emphasises religion (and miracles) in behavioural norms and values and encourages the establishment of deep-rooted links with the real or imaginary past[18]. Religion has central roles in Iran and in Iranian families. Most familial structures have been founded on religious teachings, focusing on the traditions of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH).

The considerable impact of religion on young people’s identities and lifestyles is still impressive today, as religious followers discriminate against LGBT people. Religion is not simply a personal belief or ritual; rather, it constitutes a public domain that covers the nation as a whole. Thus, many believe that the more religious the family, the more pressure upon the LGBT child or youth.

As stated, it is to be concluded that religion, the laws adopted by the country, and the traditional social context are all major factors affecting the restricted lives of LGBT people in Iran. This leads to unbalanced relationships, mental disorders and ultimately different lifestyles and identities. One respondent, a gay man from Tehran, said,

I went through an ordeal during my academic years, which transformed my entire life. There was someone at the university and we were very much interested in each other. I expressed my interest in him and he apparently had no problem. However, he was a heterosexual. By the way, we were having a two-year relationship, one year and half of which was a bit terrible for me. I was quite relying on him. I abandoned everything. I lost my life. I had a studio where I used

to sing songs. I abandoned it and quit composing poems, and then began to drink wine, because I had started a wrong relation.

The influence of religion on the religious city of Mashhad and the taboo nature of the subject of LGBT people clarify the influence of religion on the identity and lifestyle of the individual[19]. Besides the contextual impacts on family and identity, religious beliefs prevail over the city of Mashhad more than other larger cities in Iran, which distinguishes the sexual minorities of this city from others. Religious teachings adopted by sexual minorities not only make them resistant to changing their desires, but also make them determined to conceal their identities. The stigma surrounding same-sex intimacy in Islamic societies can have adverse impacts on young Muslims who consider themselves gay or lesbian, especially. In Iran, most people follow the basic Islamic concepts in their social lives, and, therefore, sexual relationships are considered legitimate as long as they do not contradict adopted social norms. Under such a system, same-sex or sexual minority attraction is not tolerated, let alone regarded as a recognised social norm.

Religion mounts more pressure on the Iranian LGBT community. As discussed in the Introduction, religious beliefs mainly contribute to social reforms that derail the adoption of the LGBT community. Iranian society attaches importance to the observance of customs wherein individual freedom of expression is curtailed. It also emphasises preserving social norms, including defined roles for men and women in a binary environment. Homosexuality, however, challenges this social order. For millions, blindly following a religion that tolerates same-sex attraction is an unforgivable sin. When sacred social norms within the context of laws legitimised by Islam are endangered, religion becomes a modifying tool to organise and control social behaviours. For the family, same-sex intimacy is similar to apostasy.

Religion can create mental disorder, which piles up pressure on individual, social and sexual decisions. Current discourses are interpreted differently as to whether being gay is accepted by Islam or not, and many seek to align their spiritualities and sexual orientations. Those Muslim gay men and lesbians who conceptualise their sexual orientation as perversion or a wrongful act may continually struggle with their self-esteem. Consider, for example, the widely held perspective that homosexuality is a sin. Islam strictly considers homosexuality to be deviant behaviour.

Many do not doubt that homophobia is a deeply entrenched feeling in Iranian culture. The internalised sense of religion that is the essence of the individual, the social and religious concepts of femininity and masculinity, and the fact that a heterosexual relationship is the only socially recognised relationship in the Islamic context cause the individual to judge their natural sentiments. The stigma against same-sex intimacy in Islamic societies will have deep effects on Muslims who consider themselves LGBT, especially younger people who are still forming and

understanding their identities, as evidenced by the story of one bisexual woman from Tehran:

My mother tells me I actually wanted to be a boy as a child. Even strange to me. I told them to call me Farshad. I did not used to wear a shirt. Girls usually have a dream of the wedding and things like that, at that time I thought I could marry a girl. I loved my female friends. I fell in love with the girl next door. Later I fell in love with my uncle's daughter. Because social norms tell you that heterosexuality is normal, I thought so. I thought it was the right thing to marry a man.

It is noticeable that, because religious beliefs deny same-sex intimacy, some Muslim gay men and lesbians develop internalised homophobia. For LGBT people stigmatised by homophobic hatred, their inevitable internal struggles, changing only after years of exposure to different sexual orientations, could lead to the renunciation of religion and disbelief in religious punishment.

People who identify as LGBT are always subject to human interpretations of sacred texts, and these interpretations may change according to time, place and social circumstances. In this regard, most respondents were found to advocate for more ethical interpretations of religious texts that respected plurality and valuing the differences between God's creatures, while at the same time resisting the prevailing interpretations of the Quran, to which thinkers resort when condemning same-sex intimacy.

Muslims refer to the story of Lut in the Quran (like the story of Lot in the Bible) to argue that Islam condemns men who express love for other men. Many Muslim gay men have different interpretations of this story, arguing that this story condemns violence, not specific sexual conduct. Seeking to reconcile their faith and sexual orientations, some Muslim LGBT people distinguish between "homosexual acts" and "homosexual identities" to suggest they were born to conform to a non-heterosexual divine plan. Thus, their homosexuality is said to be an expression of the divine will, not a mere personal choice out of lust or evil desires. Presently, a number of Islamic scholars, mainly in the West, are beginning to re-examine Islamic teachings on same-sex relations, concluding that mere condemnation amounts to a wrong interpretation [20].

In the meantime, many LGBT people have limited choices, one of which is "keep your beliefs and be what you are, because you cannot continue to 'wear a mask' and deny your homosexual desires". If someone is deprived of family support and is rejected, while their religion is no longer a relief, it is no surprise to see them losing their religious faith and relying on the support of secular institutions. Sometimes, however, religious belief may produce the opposite effect - namely, it may lead people to more conservative ideologies. LGBT people, especially young people, fearing negative family reactions, seek to comply with social norms and keep imitating the behaviours and dress of heterosexuals. This conservatism can lead to short-term illicit relationships.

The spirit of Islam is empathy, tolerance and understanding; however, LGBT people do not enjoy a positive religious framework within the Islamic context. Recognising or endorsing same-sex intimacy or homosexuality could undermine the very foundations of Islam. The need for a religion that recognises LGBT groups and accepts that they tend to be secular is not seen at this point in time. This has led many people to seek a new path towards spirituality and alternative religious precepts in their lives, rather than to follow the dominant religion of Islam. These concepts include humanism, the belief in human dignity as a truth religion, and an orientation towards new wisdom that posits sexual fluidity.

As the following narrative of an LGBT participant in this study (a lesbian from Mashhad) shows, the road to recognition is a difficult one; however, in this century, tolerance is becoming the norm and the future will likely bring today's children and youth strong support for coexistence and participation that transcends superficial support and solidarity.

I recall when I used to go to the mosque with my parents; however, after all the problems, I had a defensive stance towards God at the first stage, because I was under pressure. God could create me as a homosexual; alternatively, I could live a normal life, marry and have a child. I could live at peace. I still have the same feelings. The problem we are faced with makes us ignore our habits and beliefs; however, this made us do away with many of my religious beliefs. I would like to die one day and ask God why. I am having sex with some people. I am tired.

LGBT people are harassed and abused in Iran. They also face tough laws. They are vulnerable to domestic and social abuse and violence. There is an inseparable relationship between religion and sexual norms in Iran on the one hand, and its legal system and rigid laws on the other; accordingly, people who do not follow religious and sexual norms will be subjected to punishments. Legal punishments will be employed by the Government, the Judiciary, and non-government actors such as schools, communities and families. Iranian laws do not protect LGBT people against discrimination or harassment for their sexual orientations and gender identities. LGBT people are deprived of the legal right to have independent identities and be themselves.

According to the Iranian Islamic Penal Code (discussed in detail in Chapter 1 of the author's previous books[10, 21-26]), there is an undeniable gap between criminal measures and executive realities. Punishments for homosexuality, pederasty and lesbianism include a set of corporal sentences such as lashes, death or stoning if the conduct is repeated. At the same time, such sentences have not been carried out for years, and the judiciary and police seem to tolerate the LGBT community as long as it does not gather in large numbers and remains invisible.

When sexual minorities are asked about general laws and legal information in relation to LGBT people within Iranian law, many of them seem to be confused about the details of the laws that apply to them, though some respondents use words such as "execution", "stoning", and "lashes" lightly. While many sexual

minorities feel they are controlled, there is a sense of disbelief about the punishments following a conviction, as no recent cases of execution or stoning had been reported. Many downplay the possibility of such punishments.

In the present fieldwork, the research team witnessed the occasional police threat. Police patrols disrupted the fieldwork several times and interrupted the interviews conducted in the parks, causing the interviewees to disperse to remain unknown. It should be noted, however, that the fieldwork varied in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan, and differences existed even between different areas of a city.

In one interview, a gay man from Mashhad expressed his feelings as follows:

Sexual minority or homosexual communities present current vulnerabilities based on their context and type. Gatherings for a birthday party or anniversary celebrations in the presence of transgender people or those in special clothing get [reactions] by the police. I have heard good things taking place in Mashhad, like LGBTs' birthday parties and celebrations; however, Mashhad is a major religious city and the situation there is awful; I don't know why.

An interpretation of the interviews suggests that the anxieties of sexual minorities are not necessarily limited to the Government's security forces, and that revealing one's potential sexual orientation to family, friends and relatives is another concern.

5. Conclusions

The social suppressions that LGBT people encounter vary from country to country and involve various levels of violence, discrimination and stigmatisation that reflect the prevailing local contexts. The Internet and social networks have provided environments for the exchange of positive information about LGBT identities. In the meantime, the Internet is a conducive environment for promoting legal protections of sexual minorities.

In countries where same-sex intimacy stigmatisation is high, LGBT people, especially young people, find each other online. Although the Internet is usually a tool in the hands of more affluent individuals, it does serve as an important channel for the exchange of views and solidarity. The interactive nature of the Internet has brought about a space through which communities are formed and conversations unfold. Cyberspace provides opportunities for socialization, support, movements and information exchange about techniques of survival. In Iran, although the Government blocks websites it believes could undermine political, religious or moral issues, many in Iran have access to filter-breaking software that helps them circumvent censorship.

In Iran, LGBT people are constantly exposed to harassment. There are rigid and tough laws set out against them, and they are vulnerable to harassment, abuse and domestic and community violence. However, films, documentaries, music and other forms of art have created a glimmer of hope in recent years, giving rise to new attitudes. For example, in 2011, the Iranian film *Opposite Mirrors* portrayed

the feasibility of religious people adopting a new attitude towards sexual minorities. The film is the story of Edy, a young transgender man who tries to escape from a family who wants to force him into a marriage to save the family's face. In this film, a traditional religious woman first shows disgust and dislike towards a transgender woman. Shortly after, she observes the suffering of the transgender woman because of her father's violence, and concludes that the imposition of such suffering on others represents "evil" in the religious sense. *Opposite Mirrors* does not claim to have found a solution to the problem, but it views these aspects of society from a new angle to endorse the idea that "renouncing and abandoning these people is not the solution to the problem".

It is this author's hope that this research paper help researchers and activists to reflect more on ways that may improve LGBT people's lives in Iran. The main challenge facing LGBT people in Iran is to eradicate the negative view held in society, which strongly advocates intolerance, discrimination and legal prosecution. This negative view becomes more serious when Iranian laws and regulations renounce LGBT rights. In the meantime, NGOs' social activists aim to raise awareness of this issue in communities. Awareness-raising about LGBT people in Iranian society, as well as greater access to social networks, will make for a better public understanding of LGBT people.

Several issues should be addressed to deal with the situation for LGBT people. The challenges LGBT people face in life, problems defining and classifying related issues, and the words used to describe LGBT people must all be taken into account, because legitimising minorities and addressing their particular concerns represents the first major step to improving their situation.

Today, because of all the problems, even under the toughest conditions in the Middle East, LGBT people continue to come together underground. Over 31% of Iran's 80 million people are between 15 and 29, and this very young population profile represents an opportunity for change, new political dynamism and potentially a new attitude on gender. Promoting this generation-based perspective requires gathering, sharing and formulating an educational paradigm on integrating LGBT people into all areas of life. Young people can lead the way.

Progress in meeting the basic needs of the LGBT community in Iran will be expedited by the following: filling information gaps, exploring existing data and gathering accurate data, supporting research, testing new and innovative ideas, and planning based on accurate evaluations. When the results of such struggles are shared, the community working in this area can promote the successes and avoid repeating past mistakes; there is no doubt the entry of the NGOs into the field and their social support of the LGBT community can be fruitful.

However, society has strong feelings about the LGBT population and is generally at odds with LGBT people. Therefore, it seems that governments in the Middle East in general and in Iranian particular are not willing, or feel the need, to do anything. The pressure of denial and confrontation is exerted by society, some civil-society organisations and the family institution, and this has caused the Government to

ignore the rights of the LGBTQ community. The fact that individuals do not tolerate LGBT people is quite evident from movements across the Middle East, and, under this situation, government institutions enjoy a secure and “stable position” because they remain in line with accepted opinion. Regardless, the current situation needs to change and LGBT people and their citizenship rights should be recognised in all areas of society. The formation of cohesive and official LGBT organisations to advocate for LGBT rights in Iran could give rise to solutions to these problems.

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