

# Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Women in Sport



**Submission to the United Nations**

**Office of the High Commissioner**

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**6Rang (Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network)**

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1. The following submissions provide information in response to the questionnaire the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner has set out to prepare the “report on the intersection of race and gender discrimination in sports, including in policies, regulations and practices of sporting bodies, and elaborating on relevant international human rights norms and standards”, to be presented to the Human Rights Council at its forty-fourth session.
2. 6Rang (The Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network) is a UK registered NGO which its network and contacts span across more than 100 LGBTI individuals, the majority of whom are based in Iran. 6Rang’s mission is to raise awareness on sexual rights, and eradicate homophobia, transphobia, and violence against lesbian and transgender people in particular, as well as the LGBTI community in general. 6Rang highlights the fact that, due to the Islamic Republic’s discriminatory gender-based laws and codes favouring heterosexual males above others, as well as the patriarchal power structure rooted in Iranian culture, lesbian and transgender citizens are the most marginalized within an already marginalized segment of Iran’s population. 6Rang is a member of International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and has made submissions to UN bodies and published reports that, among other issues, have focused on documenting human rights abuses against lesbian, gay and transgender persons in healthcare settings in Iran. research focuses on the issues of this specific group.
3. As the following answers are based on research conducted by 6Rang within its mandate, it remains limited to the issues of Iranian lesbian and transgender women in sport, and is therefore not inclusive of all of women in Iran. Furthermore, these answers do not address all of the themes put forth by the questionnaire and further research may be needed for a more comprehensive picture of women in sports in Iran.
4. The submission highlights some aspects of inequality and discrimination on the basis of gender and other human rights violations, experienced by women and girls in sport.
5. It is noteworthy that in Iran, sports are currently regulated by two organisations, both of which are state-run: a) the Ministry of Sport and Youth; and b) the National Olympic Committee of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
6. Iranian women experience different forms of inequality in sports. One of these is the structural barriers that prevent women from equal participation in sports compared to their male counterparts. In Iran, women are deprived of amenities and facilities that their male equivalents enjoy. This lack of independent facilities and safe environments holds women back. For example, there are few or no football fields for women to play football on. Sometimes women are allowed to use the facilities fields, rings, or gyms that are dedicated to men. However, such permissions are restricted to a limited number of hours and are often scheduled during unconventional hours that are not suitable for women given that in Iran late hours of the day are considered unsafe for

women. Mixed-gender entry of facilities and public venue is prohibited due to the ban on women's entry to most public and social place. Under such conditions, women's needs and requirements are mostly overlooked or neglected.<sup>1</sup>

7. Another issue is that the dedicated budget for women's sport is much lower than, and inequitable compared to, the budget dedicated for men's sport. Similarly, professional female athletes are paid much lower than their male counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Finally, females are also prohibited from participating in certain sports altogether as these considered to be masculine and male-only sports. This discriminatory prohibition of certain sports also puts women at a disadvantage compared to men. For example, women are not permitted to become 'muscular' by building their bodies through bodybuilding<sup>3</sup>. However, these perceptions are entirely conventional and based on patriarchal and often outdated notions of masculinity and femininity, which can be changed. Boxing was one of the sports that was banned for women. However, after pressure from women, it was recently approved for women to practice this sport, but male spectators are not permitted<sup>4</sup>.
8. Women are often prohibited from participating in sports because of their non-conformity to heteronormative standards of behaviour. This is due to the way they behave or look, which is different from the conventional definitions of femininity. Some examples of such behaviours or appearances include having short hair, tattoos, nose piercings, high running speed and physical strength, having a muscular physique or a deep voice, and the like, which are traditionally thought of as 'masculine' characteristics not suitable for a 'feminine' girl or woman.<sup>5</sup>
9. More importantly, women participants of sports in Iran constantly face the threat of being suspected of being trans- or homosexual because of their non-conventional appearance or behaviour and therefore required to undergo sex verification tests or be expelled from sports. According to reports by 6Rang, women are also often arbitrarily expelled from sports, which is not based on any regulations. Federation's Security Officials fire players on the suspicion of players being transsexual or homosexual. "Very short hair, men's clothing, and sportswear style is banned in the camps of Iran's women's national football team. If we show one of these characteristics, we are sent for a sex verification test for sure.", says Shirin, a female player in the women's first division.
10. According to 6Rang's report, the sex verification test involves a psychological test in the first stage. For this test, athletes must answer questions on desirability to participate in feminine societies, interest in cohabitation, the reason for short hair, and other similar questions. Then, in case of a positive diagnosis by the psychologist, athletes are referred to a medical commission composed usually of one to six persons (three men and three women) for breast and vaginal tests. In some cases, female athletes will have to undergo ultrasound and ovarian ultrasound in addition to these

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<sup>1</sup> [واکوی مشکلات عدیده ورزش بانوان در کشور/گره های کور](#)

<sup>2</sup> [ورزش زنان راهکارها و موانع](#)

<sup>3</sup> ['زنان ایرانی و ورزش بدنسازی: از جرم انگاری تا اجبار به ترک کشور](#)

<sup>4</sup> [!سرانجام بوکس بانوان راه افتاد/ ورود آقایان ممنوع](#)

<sup>5</sup> ['محرومت فوتبالیست های زن ایرانی به بهانه رفتار مردانه: ادر فوتبال زنان ایران چه می گذرد؟'](#)

tests. Obtaining a medical approval for 'being female' is the last step in these tests and a condition of being allowed to participate in sports. However, according to athletes even after obtaining such an approval, they are put under pressure and threats for as long as they maintain a behaviour different from feminine clichés. Statistics provided by one of the coaches of women's football confirms these claims. The coach has said in an interview that many athletes who physically had no problem were psychologically pressured into going through sex change.<sup>6</sup>

11. In many cases, this is due to the reports by the federation, coach, or players of the opposing team against players who do not comply with customary gender boundaries. In 2014, officials of the Iranian Football Federation dismissed seven women football players with the excuse of 'gender ambiguity'. Following this news, female players and gender identity came under severe abuse and mockery in the traditional and social media networks whilst no serious attention was paid to the violation of the rights of these individuals<sup>7</sup>.
12. Enforcing sex verification tests on the basis of gender non-conformity excludes athlete from participation while also subjecting them to abuse and humiliation. These requirements of conventional and traditional femininity<sup>8</sup> not only put the non-conforming women at the risk of misdiagnosis, psychologically enforced sex change, abuse and humiliation, but also puts them at an unfavourable situation compared to women who do conform to these arbitrary rules and will therefore be favoured by their institutions, coaches, and others who are in charge.
13. After a 2011 resolution of the Olympic Committee, testing for androgen levels is permitted in Iran. If it is determined that a participant has high levels of androgen hormone that matches the level usually present in male participants, she is excluded from continuing her participation in sports. This is done with the justification that high levels of androgen afford these participants unfair superiority and advantage compared to their fellow competitors of the same sex. However, these participants are given the option to lower their levels of androgen to the average level present in people of the same sex as them and only then they are allowed to participate in their sport. This method does not work as often hormone therapy results in permanent changes in the physical condition of the athletes leading them to permanently break off from the sports<sup>9</sup>.
14. These barriers are the living examples of what reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal stereotypes and stigmatises non-conformist gender expressions. However, it does not end there. These forced tests of sex and gender verification directly infringe on the athletes' dignity, bodily integrity, and bodily autonomy.
15. In February 2014, [BBC Persian reported](#) of seven female football players being laid off due to failing the 'gender ambiguity' tests. Ahmad Hashemian, head of the Iranian football federation's medical committee, [has stated](#) that as an Islamic country we are

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<sup>6</sup> شش رنگ: محرومیت هفت فوتبالیست زن در ایران؛ تبعیض براساس هویت جنسیتی را متوقف کنید

<sup>7</sup> 'محرومیت فوتبالیست‌های زن ایرانی به بهانه 'رفتار مردانه'

<sup>8</sup> شش رنگ: محرومیت هفت فوتبالیست زن در ایران؛ تبعیض براساس هویت جنسیتی را متوقف کنید (پاراگراف 8)، محرومیت

<sup>8</sup> 'در فوتبال زنان ایران چه می‌گذرد؟ فوتبالیست‌های زن ایرانی به بهانه 'رفتار مردانه (پاراگراف 2،8)،

<sup>9</sup> شش رنگ: محرومیت هفت فوتبالیست زن در ایران؛ تبعیض براساس هویت جنسیتی را متوقف کنید

more sensitive to this issue [of gender ambiguity] than some other countries and the FIFA. [In another interview, this official told Islamic Republic News Agency \(IRNA\)](#) that 'if these individuals resolve their problems through [sex reassignment] surgery and pass the appropriate medical tests, they can once again become active in football and futsal.'

16. However, according to the same BBC report, many of the players had claimed that the real reason for this type of expulsion of players is often 'behaviour and appearance that does not conform with the usual definitions of femininity' and disregard for 'conventional gender boundaries'.
17. [The field research conducted by 6Rang](#) suggests that most cases of exclusion and the subsequent expulsion are arbitrary and not on the basis of any regulation. Federation Security Officers expel people based on the authentication of transsexuality or perceived suspicion of homosexuality.
18. This policy of the Iranian Football Federation upholds discrimination and violence that Iranian authorities routinely exercise against citizens because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Many of the rules and regulations in Iran are enforced exclusively on men or women and most public spaces are only for females or only for males. For this reason, all of the people who don't fit into the definitions and expectations of the 'ordinary' men and women because of the way they dress, behave, their physical attributes, or the type of their activities are harassed by not only their families and society, but also from the police, education officials, healthcare providers, and in sports. This research shows that transgender people in Iran are being pressured and often times forced undergo sex reassignment surgeries in order to have official institutions and society accept their gender identity as being a man or a woman. In such circumstances, pushing people to go through sex change is in fact a violation of their privacy. On the other hand, given the taboo of sex and gender issues, one can imagine what it would mean for women with short hair or muscular physique to be labelled 'trans'.<sup>10</sup>
19. Implementing mandatory sex verification policies that exclude women athletes from competing solely based on their non-conforming gender expression, violates their right to privacy. This right is recognized in Article 5 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Iran is also a signatory. Additionally, forcing women to go through unnecessary medical procedures, including risky and harmful sex change surgeries, neglects their right to health as enshrined in international law, including in Article 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The right to health includes the right to sexual and reproductive freedom, the right to freedom from torture and trials, and treatments without medical consent. In the [Yogyakarta Principles](#), which specify the current status of international law on gender identity and sexual orientation, it states: 'everyone has the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. No

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<sup>10</sup> شش رنگ: محرومیت هفت فوتبالیست زن در ایران؛ تبعیض بر اساس هویت جنسیتی را متوقف کنید



one shall be subjected to invasive or irreversible medical procedures that modify sex characteristics without their free, prior and informed consent'.<sup>11</sup>

20. Transsexual surgery on women's sports teams is about changing sex from woman to man. Subsequently, these transsexual men are eliminated from the women's team after they have undergone the sex change operation. They can play in the men's team if they so desire.
21. The physical condition and strength of the transsexual person who undergo the sex change operation from woman to man is not comparable to that of a man. Transgender women who play professionally and occasionally in the women's national team are unable to compete with male players after a sex change surgery and give up professional sports.
22. Expulsion from the playing field is not an exclusive consequence for those who go through sex change. Shirin, a female football player who likes to always have her hair short and wear sportswear, is one of the players who is considering leaving professional sports instead of going through sex reassignment or conforming the stereotypes of society regarding feminine behaviour. She is someone whose choices for even her makeup, hair, and dress are not tolerated. She says, 'in football clubs when your behaviour and dressing style is slightly different from other women, everyone will repeatedly humiliate you so much and call 'transgender' so much until you voluntarily kiss professional sports goodbye'<sup>12</sup>.



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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> ['محرومیت فوتبالیست‌های زن ایرانی به بهانه رفتار مردانه'](#)