



Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network

Gender as a Barrier; Situation of Iranian LGBTI Women's Rights to Participate in Sports

Submission in response to the calls by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls and the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights for input on the right to participate in sports

8 May, 2024

About 6Rang:

6Rang (Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network) is a UK-registered not-for-profit organization established following the first Iranian lesbian and transgender gathering in 2010. 6Rang's mission is to raise awareness of sexual rights and eradicate homophobia, transphobia, and violence against lesbian and transgender individuals in particular, as well as the LGBTI community in general. 6Rang has made submissions to UN bodies individually or jointly with international organizations, including ILGA World—the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association—and The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty (WCADP). Additionally, it has published reports focused on documenting human rights abuses in Iran based on SOGI.

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Methodology

In response to a call for inputs by the Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights and calls by other UN human rights mechanisms, 6Rang conducted in-depth interviews with 17 LBT women in Iran who professionally engage in sports. The aim was to learn about their situation in terms of the enjoyment of the right to participate in sports. We put the key questions mentioned in the call to our interviewees, collected their information and analysed them. The information we obtained were related to the fields of futsal, volleyball, football, kickboxing, bodybuilding, and taekwondo and mainly respond to the call's questions 4 and 5.

6Rang has also used documented cases and background information it has obtained over the past ten years for its submission to the UN human rights mechanisms, including in response to the Office of the High Commissioner's questionnaire 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".

Individual names and real identities have been changed to pseudonyms throughout the submission to ensure the safety and security of the research participants and protect them against possible reprisals.

Context

1. Iran is a deeply gendered society where an individual's sex/gender significantly influences their rights and responsibilities under criminal and family law, as well as dictating the clothes they may wear, the university courses they are eligible to enrol in, their seating arrangements on buses and trains, the extent of their travel freedom, and even the specific doors they are allowed to use when entering government buildings and airports.¹ The laws and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran establish a clear hierarchy between men and women, embedding structural gender discrimination.² These regulations not only control the behaviour of people of different genders but are deeply rooted in the notions of male dominance and female subordination, enforcing traditional gender roles.
2. Furthermore, the Iranian Islamic Penal Code criminalizes same-sex conducts, with punishments that vary from flogging to the death penalty. Restrictions on gender identity expression are stringent; individuals must be diagnosed with a 'gender identity disorder' and undergo medical interventions to express their gender identity legally.³ Deviations from gender norms, including non-adherence to the mandatory Islamic hijab rules, are

¹ 6Rang & Justice for Iran, *Diagnosing Identities, Wounding Bodies; Medical Abuses and Other Human Rights Violations against Lesbian, Gay and Transgender People in Iran* (2014), available at: <https://6rang.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Diagnosing-Identities-Paralyzing-Bodies.pdf>.

² UK Parliamentary Ad-Hoc Inquiry Into The Situation Of Women And Girls In Afghanistan And Iran, *Shattering Women's Rights, Shattering Lives* (March 2024), available at: <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=Gender-Apartheid-Inquiry-Report-March-2024>.

³ UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note; Iran: Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression* (June 2022), available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62b2d583e90e0765d523ca79/IRN_CPIN_Sexual_orientation_and_gender_identity_or_expression.pdf.

penalized.⁴ Lesbian, trans, and non-binary individuals, by expressing their identity through appearance or behaviour deemed unconventional, risk facing imprisonment, fines, or corporal punishment. Specifically, lesbian, bisexual and trans women face additional challenges due to gender-biased laws, placing them in an inferior position. Gender segregation and related measures exacerbate discrimination.⁵

3. In Iran, sports are currently regulated by two organisations, both of which are state-run: a) the Ministry of Sport; and b) the National Olympic Committee of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Women in Iran 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.⁶ This lack of independent facilities and safe environments holds women back. 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. Female sports fans are also discriminated against, for example they are not allowed to enter stadiums to watch male football matches.⁷
4. In an environment rife with discrimination, LGBTI women in sports encounter both violence and discrimination, which stem from their perceived or actual sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression.

Some of Obstacles to LGBTI women participation in sports in Iran

5. In addition to the pervasive gender inequality in general, and particularly in sports, interviews conducted by 6Rang confirm that LGBTI women perceive themselves as facing heightened discrimination and violence in sports, more so than other female groups. This is attributed to their gender non-conforming appearance and suspicions of involvement in same-sex relationships, which are criminalized in Iran. The following section will provide some non-exhaustive examples of such discrimination and violence, which restrict the participation of LGBTI women in sports.

(A) Compulsory Veiling Rules and Debilitating Sports Outfits

6. LGBTI individuals must adhere to compulsory veiling rules (hijab) not only in public places but also in sports attire. This requirement discriminates against them compared to male athletes and significantly hampers their ability to compete internationally. It places them at a severe disadvantage relative to female athletes from other countries and restricts their participation in many sports, such as swimming. Mona, a 25-year-old volleyball player told 6Rang in a written interview, "In volleyball, the basic outfits for both girls and boys are similar—t-shirts and shorts. However, girls must wear a support layer under the t-shirt and shorts, a tunic dress over it, and cover their hair and neck with a *maghna'e* (a pullover headscarf with a stitched front). Playing in this attire is particularly

⁴ 6Rang, *War on Bodies and Minds: Gender Persecution of LGBTQ+ Protestors in the Context of the 2022-23 Iran Uprising* (September 2023), available at: <https://6rang.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/War-on-Bodies-and-Minds-EN-FINAL-.pdf>.

⁵ UK Home Office, *Ibid*.

⁶ The Guardian, *Iranian women and sport: every obstacle an opportunity* (20 April 2015), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/apr/19/iran-women-sports-stadium-competitive-obstacles>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Women Blocked From Entering Stadium* (31 March 2022), available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/31/iran-women-blocked-entering-stadium>.

challenging, especially for queer individuals."

7. Furthermore, reports obtained by 6Rang highlight that LGBTI women have faced disciplinary actions or have been prevented from accessing sports arenas and participating in events for not adhering to the Islamic veil requirements. This enforcement has posed significant challenges, especially for non-binary and trans women, who often do not comply with the compulsory hijab regulations.
8. Another interviewee described the situation of a young transgender woman who faced enormous pressure to wear the *maghna'e*, not only on the field but also after the game and while returning home. She said, "This may seem trivial compared to the major issues we face as women athletes, but consider that this individual is not even 18 years old. The authorities are aware that wearing the *maghna'e* places significant mental health pressure on this transgender person, yet they persistently enforce it."
9. Sima, a 37-year-old lesbian from a city in central Iran shared that even in a women-only sports environment, they were warned by authorities that if caught without a veil by CCTV cameras, the entire team would be barred from playing on that field as a punishment.

(B) Mandatory Sex Verification Tests

10. Sports authorities have consistently expressed concern over what they term the '*do-jenseb*' crisis in women's leagues and national teams.⁸ '*Do-jenseb*,' a term that translates to 'hermaphrodite' and carries extreme derogatory connotations in Persian, is used to describe individuals whose gender identity or expression deviates from the state-endorsed definitions of femininity and masculinity. As a result, such athletes face disciplinary measures and even expulsion.⁹
11. Sex verification tests are mandatory for all football and futsal players. Women athletes who spoke to 6Rang confirmed that the Iran Football Federation requires clubs to submit a written confirmation for each player, certified by a designated doctor who has examined them. This certification is a prerequisite for eligibility to compete in the national league.
12. Fariba, a footballer, shared in an interview with 6Rang that a mandatory requirement for joining women's leagues or national teams is undergoing a sex verification test at a state-approved sports medical centre. This process includes hormone testing and physical examinations, despite the athletes' female gender being confirmed on their identification documents. Maral, a futsal player, further confirmed that participation in events organized by the Iran Football Federation is restricted to those who possess medical documentation confirming their female sex.
13. In 2014, the Iranian Football Federation officials dismissed seven female football players citing 'gender ambiguity' as the reason. This incident led to significant abuse and mockery of female players and their gender identity across traditional and social media, with little to no consideration given to the rights violations these individuals faced.¹⁰

⁸ See: <https://iranwire.com/fa/sports/3768/> (in Persian).

⁹ See: <https://bit.ly/3IGP5HP> (in Persian).

¹⁰ 6Rang, *Islamic Republic football officials and gender-based discrimination against female athletes* (16 February 2014), available at: <https://6rang.org/english/1598/>.

14. Although there have been no reports of expulsions since then, the practice of mandatory sex verification tests continues. Mandating sex verification tests due to gender non-conformity not only bars athletes from participation but also exposes them to mistreatment and degradation. Such demands for adherence to conventional and traditional femininity pose significant risks for non-conforming women, including the dangers of misdiagnosis, coerced gender reassignment, mistreatment, and humiliation. Additionally, these standards disadvantage them in comparison to their conforming counterparts, who are more likely to receive favour from institutions, coaches, and other authorities. Azal, a kick-boxing athlete, mentioned in an interview with 6Rang that sport authorities exclude players from competitions if they discover an athlete is trans and has not undergone sex reassignment surgery. Furthermore, if authorities find out a player identifies as lesbian or bisexual, the athlete is sent to the disciplinary committee, which may lead to expulsion from sporting events.

(C) Restrictions on Gender Non-conforming Athletes

15. LGBTI women frequently face exclusion from sports due to their non-conformity to heteronormative standards of behaviour and appearance, which diverge from traditional definitions of femininity. Attributes such as short hair, tattoos, nose piercings, high running speed, physical strength, muscular physique, or a deep voice are examples of what are conventionally deemed 'masculine' traits, considered inappropriate for women. "Very short hair, men's clothing, and sportswear style are prohibited in the training camps of Iran's women's national football team. Displaying any of these traits almost certainly leads to a sex verification test," explains Shirin, a member of a women's futsal team. Often, team management or coaches dictate the players' attire and hairstyles, specifically banning short haircuts. Such regulations are enforced under the guise of preventing 'masculine' dressing. The personal style choices of non-binary and trans women, particularly regarding makeup, hair, and clothing, are frequently rejected. A senior lesbian futsal player also shared that their coach mandates women with short hairstyles to cover up with a hat or scarf, or alternatively, to abstain from attending practice.

16. 6Rang has also gathered information indicating that coaches exert control over the personal relationships of team members. Specifically, women who do not meet the established criteria for femininity are singled out for this discriminatory treatment. They may face intrusive inquiries about their sexual relationships and desires, leading to significant psychological pressure to reveal such personal details. In some instances, players may be expelled by the coach or team management based solely on suspicions of a relationship between them and another player.

17. Borna, a lesbian volleyball player told 6Rang that when they were on tour for provincial games, one night, her partner laid down beside her and both of them, who were 16 years old were expelled from the games by the authorities upon receiving reports.

18. Sanam, a kick-boxing athlete, notes the need for extreme caution, avoiding any display of affection or behaviour that could be interpreted as homosexual by the authorities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

19. The plight of Iranian LGBTI women in sports, as examined by the 6Rang submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, illuminates a systemic pattern of

discrimination, violence and exclusion underpinned by deeply entrenched gender norms and the criminalization of non-heteronormative identities. The findings of this submission reveal that LGBTI athletes face multifaceted discrimination that restricts their participation in sports through mechanisms such as compulsory veiling, mandatory sex verification tests, and the prohibition of gender non-conforming expression. These restrictions not only hinder their athletic careers but also impose significant mental health burdens and social ostracization.

20. From the legal obligation to wear the hijab in sports settings, which compromises their ability to compete internationally, to the invasive and demeaning sex verification tests mandated by sports authorities, the rights to equality and non-discrimination of these women are systematically violated. The impacts of these laws, regulations and policies extend beyond the playing field, affecting their personal dignity, freedom of expression, and right to privacy. The submission also confirms that LGBTI athletes face in accessing and competing in sports professionally contravene the principles laid out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, particularly their right to work and freedom from discrimination at work.
21. Without removing the gender-discriminatory laws in Iran which has led to a system of gender apartheid in general¹¹, and decriminalization of same-sex relations in particular, it would be challenging to address many of the above obstacles to LGBTI women's participation in sports. To ensure equal participation of LGBTI women in all aspects of the society and cultural activities, including sports, we reiterate our call to the international community to hold Iran accountable for its discriminatory laws and practices, and end gender apartheid and decriminalization of same sex relations in Iran.

¹¹ In the latest report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javid Rahman “regrets that the Iranian authorities have effectively maintained a system of gender apartheid and insisted on draconian laws, policies and practices that increasingly violate the human rights and human dignity of Iranian girls and women.”
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5562-situation-human-rights-islamic-republic-iran-report-special>