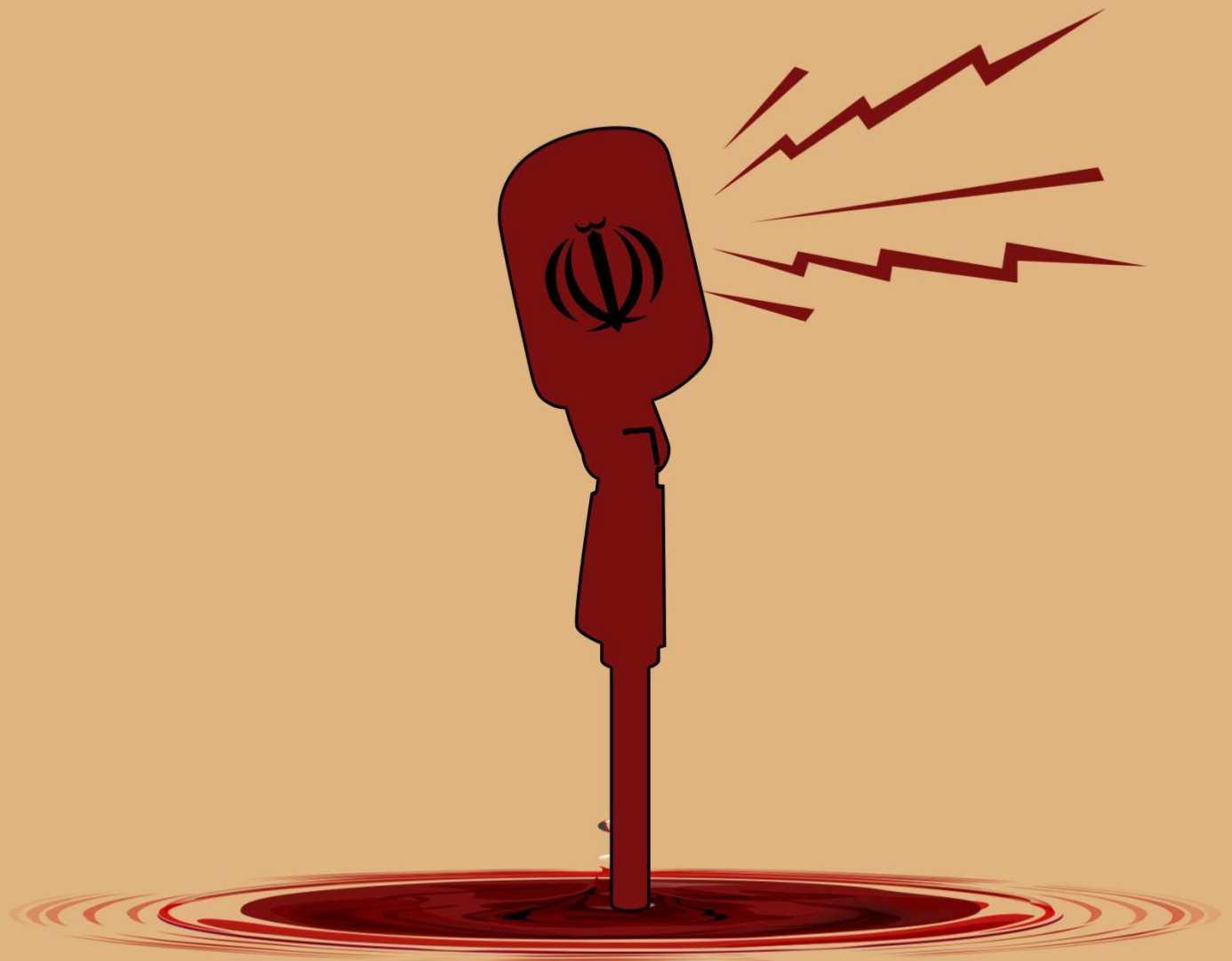


Silencing protests: Official hate speech against LGBT people as a tool of suppression

6Rang(Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network)

March 2023



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6RANG



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Context

The death of Mahsa Jina Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police sparked nationwide protests in Iran in September 2022. The protests were met with violent repression by the state's security forces. At this time, at least over 500 people have died, including at least 71 children, thousands have been injured, including those who were shot to be blinded, and approximately 20,000 were arrested. There is no data on how many have been released from jail.

The authorities used all types of torture¹, including rape and sexual abuse, even against children to coerce them to make false confessions. Often, the confessions involved being intrigued by foreign states such as the USA, the UK and Israel or exiled media outlet to disturb public order.

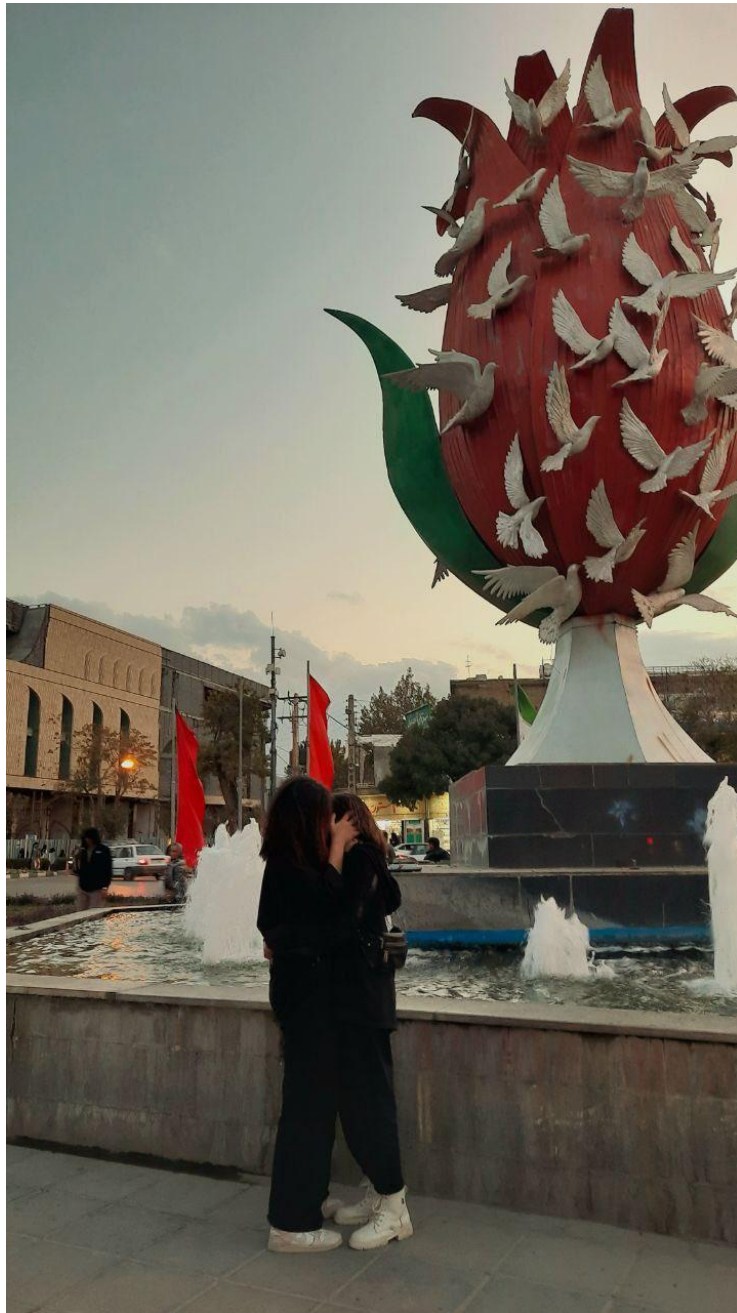
Despite the mass repression of the protests, minority and marginalised groups have been one of the loudest voices. Many have not only actively participated in street protests but also come forward with struggles they have faced due to their intersectional identities. One of the largest minority groups that made themselves visible during the protests was the LGBTQ+ community. As such, issues related to individuals in this minority group have come to light in the face of the Iranian general public. We have witnessed immense support, for example graffiti on university campuses signposting it as a safe space for LGBTQ+ people.

Outside of Iran, the Iranian LGBTQ+ diaspora united to help amplify the voices inside Iran. From speaking publicly about LGBTQ+ issues to meeting with international actors, exiled activists were also a big part of making the community visible.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-child-detainees-subjected-to-flogging-electric-shocks-and-sexual-violence-in-brutal-protest-crackdown/>



Protestor holding LGBTQ+ flag in public, November 2022



City of Arak, November 2022

The courage of the community making themselves visible has led to many speaking openly about their identities in case their families attempted to erase them.² There have been instances of LGBTQ+ people holding rainbow flags, kissing each other in public and graffitiing pro-LGBTQ+ sentiments. This courage and acts of visibility could not remain

² This increased after the death of Nika Shakarami, whose family attempted to erase her identity as a queer woman. This came after Shadi Amin, a prominent LGBTQ+ activist, dedicated the Lesbian Visibility Award to her. An onslaught of online hate against her and anybody who claimed that Nika was queer followed, claiming that her name was being 'dirtied'. <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2022/11/30/even-in-death-we-fight-to-be-visible/>

unnoticed by the Islamic Republic authorities. As this report outlines, the official hate speech towards LGBTQ+ community has been a response to increasing visibility.

In the context of the Islamic Republic regime, these acts are particularly dangerous. In a country where same-sex relations are criminalised and punished, being visible as an LGBTQ+ person may mean harsh punishments from lashing to the death penalty. Apart from the law, Iranian society is not particularly receptive of this community – harassment, social isolation, forced marriage and honour killings are common experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

Although strides have been made in terms of visibility for LGBTQ+ people in the recent protests, hate speech is still rampant, especially amongst state officials who use it publicly to vilify LGBTQ+ people further. State media presents LGBTQ+ individuals as ‘immoral and corrupt’, ‘animalistic and subhuman’ and ‘sick and diseased’; apart from being presented as inferior, LGBTQ+ people are often accused of working with Western imperialists or being anti-revolutionary.

These sentiments were seen repeatedly during the period of September 2022 to February 2023. This report serves as an addition to 6Rang’s 2017 report, *“It’s a great honour to violate homosexuals’ rights”: Official Hate Speech Against LGBT People in Iran*³. The report will expand on the hate speech recorded during the time of the protests, while LGBTQ+ people were at the forefront of protests. It can be deduced that hate speech made by officials against this minority increased or intensified in the reporting period.

An increase in hate speech has a direct, knock-on effect on the mental and physical wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people in Iran. The ostracised community experiences an exacerbation in domestic and social violence, harassment, prejudice from family members and immediate community, and abuse.

Legal scope

Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) imposes an obligation on states to prohibit by law, “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” Although it only lists three characteristics which states are required to protect from incitement – nationality, race, and religion - international human rights experts consider the list to be inclusive of sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴

In 1994 in the case of *Toonen v. Australia*, the UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors the implementation of the ICCPR, held that States Parties are obligated to protect individuals from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation⁵. This decision was confirmed again by the UN Human Rights Committee,⁶ which have urged States Parties to

³ <https://6rang.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Official-Hate-Speech-against-LGBT-People-in-Iran.pdf>

⁴ See Article 19, Responding to Hate Speech against LGBTI people, October 2013, online: http://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/responding_to_hate_speech_against_lgbti_people.pdf (accessed 9 Mar 2017).

⁵ *Toonen v. Australia*, communication No. 488/1992 (CCPR/C/50/D/488/1992).

⁶ See, for example, *Young v. Australia*, communication No. 941/2000 (CCPR/C/78/D/941/2000), para.10.4; *X v. Colombia*, communication no. 1361/2005 (CCPR/C/89/D/1361/2005), para. 9; and concluding observations on Mexico (CCPR/C/MEX/CO/5), para. 21, and Uzbekistan (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/3), para. 22.

“guarantee equal rights to all individuals, as established in the Covenant, regardless of sexual orientation”⁷ and adopt legislation that prohibits discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In its general comment on discrimination, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, has recognized sexual orientation and gender identity as prohibited grounds of discrimination.⁸ In addition, the Committee has affirmed the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in its general comments on the rights to work, education, social security and the highest attainable standard of health.⁹

In their general comments and concluding observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee against Torture have also included recommendations on countering discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁰

The Yogyakarta Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender Identity, adopted in 2006 and updated in 2017, highlight the obligation of states to take appropriate and effective measures to eradicate all forms of violence, discrimination and other harm, including any advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics, whether by public or private actors (Principle 30).¹¹

Iran’s Islamic Penal Code criminalizes same-sex sexual acts with penalties ranging from flogging to the death penalty (Articles 233-240). These penalties also apply to children under the age of 18 as the age of criminal responsibility in Iran is nine lunar years for girls and 15 lunar years for boys (Article 147).

Hateful representations of LGBTQ+ individuals by state officials, paramilitary groups and media

Amidst the peak of the protests in November 2022, a group of Basijis (a paramilitary group belonged to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)) set rainbow flags on fire in front of the British Embassy in Tehran¹². This was in direct protest of LGBTQ+ people being welcomed by protestors and being visible in protests. Disgusted by the role of the LGBTQ+

⁷ See the Committee’s concluding observations on Chile (CCPR/C/CHL/CO/5), para. 16. See also its concluding observations on San Marino (CCPR/C/SMR/CO/2), para. 7, and Austria (CCPR/C/AUT/CO/4), para. 8.

⁸ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 20, Non-Discrimination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 2, para. 2) (E/C.12/GC/20), para. 32.

⁹ See General Comment No. 18 (E/C.12/GC/18) (right to work), para. 12 (b) (i); No. 15 (E/C.12/2002/11) (right to water), para. 13; No. 19 (E/C.12/GC/19) (right to social security), para. 29; and No. 14 (E/C.12/2000/4) (right to the highest attainable standard of health), para. 18.

¹⁰ See, for example, Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 (CRC/C/GC/13), paras. 60 and 72(g); and Committee against Torture, General Comment No. 2 (CAT/C/GC/2), para. 21.

¹¹ See http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkOZ99BsvYM/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

community in the protests, this horrifying and hateful state-sanctioned act was a reactionary outcry and attempt at instigating fear.^{13 14}

These acts were not only limited to visibility on social media and the public, but also wider protests against the current treatment of LGBTQ+ people, internationally. In October 2022, a representative from 6Rang stood in front of over 100,000 people at the largest opposition protest, in Berlin, stating that democracy cannot be achieved in Iran without the realisation of LGBTQ+ rights¹⁵. In November 2022, 6Rang's director, gave a statement at the emergency session of the UN Human Rights Council about this issue.¹⁶ The voices of the LGBTQ+ community being heard internationally and publicly, outside the control of the Islamic Republic, has precipitated an onslaught of hateful propaganda.

Although the official hate speech targeting LGBTQ+ community has a history as long as the Islamic Republic, it was only during these protests that the state forces recognised their role in revolutionary mobilisations and acted quickly to discredit it by associating it with a foreign government.



Figure 2: Basijis burning rainbow flags outside British embassy in Tehran, November 2022

Same sex acts have long been represented as immoral and anti-Islamic by the Islamic Republic regime. The highest-ranking officials often take part in vilifying LGBTQ+ individuals publicly and without regard. One of the ways in which officials have instigated hate against this minority group is by using Islam and religion. In December 2022, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave a public speech in which he said:

¹³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkstEZ3MGER/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

¹⁴ <https://6rang.org/73692/>

¹⁵ <https://6rang.org/73353/>

¹⁶ <https://6rang.org/73518/>

“Banning *hamjensbazi* [faggotry] is not only a concern of Islam, but it is forbidden in all religions.”¹⁷

Iranian officials have continued to show homosexuality as a moral failure and an agenda by the West. In February 2023, President Ebrahim Raisi spoke about the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ in a speech:

“On the matter of family, we are the accusers and you [the West] are the accused. You are promoting the lowliest form of obscenity – homosexuality.”¹⁸

Raisi has likened homosexuality to the, “...ugliest morality that is accepted by the modern world.”¹⁹

On a similar note, Mostafa Mahdavi, the Deputy Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Lorestan Province said, “when homosexuality is made legal in the West, it shows that their morality has fallen.”²⁰

In January 2023, Hojjatollah Masoud Ali, teacher at a seminary (*hawza*), said:

“Reducing and making hijab optional, allowing relationships between boys and girls, accepting homosexuality and ultimately destroying families are the goals of our enemies.”²¹

In the same speech, he conflates this ‘immorality’ with the protests, saying, “in the past 100 days, the rioters have shown what they want!”

This combination of the protests and same sex relations has been a common theme in current trends in hate speech. Officials have clearly been using existing societal homophobia to incite the fear of homosexuality spreading should the Islamic Republic fall.

More explicitly, In December 2022, Khorramabad’s Friday prayer leader, Ahmadreza Shahrokhi, said, “the dispute is not over a few strands of hair ... those behind the scenes want to force homosexuality and marriage with animals on Muslims.”

Officials of the Islamic Republic have often used derogatory language that likens homosexuality to animalistic behaviour and deviancy. Again, hate speech here has been directed at the protests and uses homophobia to instil fear.

State-affiliated medial and journalists have had a hand in spreading hate against the LGBTQ+ community. The language often resonates with what is said by state officials. Derogatory language is also prevalent in articles about LGBTQ+ people.

In November 2022, Hosein Shariatmandari, a fundamentalist journalist, said:

¹⁷ <https://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn66296913/موضوعاتی-مثل-همجنس-بازی-فقط-مربوط-اسلام>

¹⁸ <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1730115/انتقاد-رئیس-از-غرب-بابت-ترویج-همجنس-گری>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrCVrCyFVvo>

²⁰ <https://lorestan.iqna.ir/fa/news/4120129/زن-در-گفتار-انقلاب-اسلامی-یک-شخصیت-مشارکت-گر است>

²¹ <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/اد-آزادی-آغوش-ایگان-جو-آزاد>

“One of the main goals of this riot is to break apart and break our country into pieces... One of the hopes of this situation is to legalise and spread *hamjensbazi* (faggotry) in a future without the Islamic Republic.”²²

Much of the fearmongering about same-sex relationships mandated by state officials and state media lies in the concept of interrupted or broken traditional families. Heteronormative familial relationships are the pinnacle of moral goodness in the Islamic Republic framework. As such, LGBTQ+ individuals are shown to be an interruption to normal family dynamics.

In an article by Fars News, Hasan Kouhestani wrote, “if we look back to the sexual revolution in the West when men and women were freer in their relationships, we can see that men were no longer interested in marriage.”

6Rang asserts that the increase in hate speech in the period of September 2022 to February 2023 has been a direct result of the prominence of LGBTQ+ people in the protests. Although official hate speech is not a new phenomenon, an exacerbation has been witnessed, especially when coupled with talks of the protests. This type of official hate speech is especially dangerous given the isolated and marginalised nature of the community. As mentioned, an increase in governmental, societal and domestic violence, abuse and ostracization by family and friends is expected to follow.

Conclusion and recommendations

Under international human rights law, everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, has the right to State protection from violence, discrimination and other harm, whether by government officials or by any individual or group.

In Iran, LGBT people are denied this fundamental human right. They are frequently subjected to harassment, discrimination, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, based on their gender expressions which are deemed to violate mandatory veiling, strict Islamic dress codes and stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity. If they are convicted of engaging in consensual same-sex sexual acts, they may also face penalties ranging from flogging to the death penalty.

State officials and affiliated media continue to use hateful and derogatory language against the LGBTQ+ community in Iran. It has intensified and has been expressed in different forms following the participation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the protests in 2022-23. In their attempts to quash the efforts of the community in the protests, they have used such language to deter from the validity of their demands. Furthermore, officials have used the existing societal hatred and ignorance against the LGBTQ+ community to invalidate the protests.

6Rang is deeply concerned that the use of such language and propaganda further alienates an oppressed group, grows the unjust hatred and hostility towards them and affects the

²² <https://eslahatnews.com/گسترش-میباشد-در-ایران-رسمیت-یافته-و-همجنسبازی-در-ایران-رسمیت-یافته-و-گسترش-میباشد>

wellbeing of queer youth in Iran. This language has also had a role in deterring ordinary people away from the message of the protests. It continues to stir a fear of an 'immoral' Iran that keeps oppressors enjoying impunity. They use pre-existing societal homophobia to spread the fear of homosexuality being forced upon Iran if the Islamic Republic were to go. Officials have clearly been using hate speech to instigate a link between the protests and 'immorality', which is both dangerous to protestors and the LGBTQ+ community.

Most importantly, 6Rang recommends the abolition of the death penalty for same-sex acts, along with cruel and inhumane punishments. 6Rang recommends further the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships, the repeal of mandatory hijab laws, adopting protection for the LGBTQ+ community and recognising these individuals as equals, and not 'less-than'. We also recommend that hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community be prohibited (as per international law), especially when instigated by officials and government-affiliated media. Those responsible for such actions must be held accountable and the consequences must be more severe when the perpetrators are state-affiliated.



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