



Seeking Refuge:

A JOURNEY FROM SYRIA TO LGBTQ REFUGEE ADVOCACY

HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

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Brief History of LGBTQ Individuals in Syria

LGBTQ Legal Status

- ▶ Article 520 of the Syrian Penal Code criminalizes homosexuality.
- ▶ Judges are not allowed to refer to any medical or psychological studies; they can only refer to penal codes and/or Islamic Sharia law.
- ▶ There are no laws against cross-dressing, but cross-dressers can be tried according to Sharia laws.
- ▶ Article 507 of the Syrian Penal Code prohibits men from “disguising” in women’s clothes, and is punishable by up to 18 months of imprisonment.
- ▶ There are no laws to regulate changing one’s gender, in official documents. Syrian laws do not recognize the rights of transsexual or transgendered people.



Syrian LGBTQ Community Before and After the Current Unrest



1980s-1990s

OPPRESSION

Government Oppression (1980s-1990s)

- ▶ Syrian government grants immunity to *Mukhabarat* officials (secret police).
- ▶ In the 1980's and 1990's, homosexual men were only able to meet other homosexual men in cruising areas.
- ▶ Those areas were targeted by both the regular police and the secret police (*Mukhabarat*).
- ▶ These policemen would blackmail and kidnap gay men, and due to their immunity they were not held accountable.

Societal Oppression of Lesbians(1980s-1990s)

- ▶ Bisexual women adapted to the lifestyle that was enforced upon them by tradition (marrying a man), but would have secret relationships with women.
- ▶ Lesbians were forced to marry, and in some cases, their families would hold them in a house “detention” until a marriage could be arranged.



2000-2010

PROGRESS

The Mighty Internet

- ▶ In 1998, the internet became available in Syria, but was limited to those who managed to obtain the paperwork needed to install internet at their homes or workplaces.
- ▶ In 2000, Mr. Bashar Assad came to power, and internet connections were made available to everyone, without requiring as much paperwork.
- ▶ LGBT people discovered the resources which the internet offers and started to connect with other homosexuals around the world!
- ▶ Homosexuals began opening their own businesses.
- ▶ Some gay men began organizing regular private gay parties in the suburbs of Damascus, the capital.

Government Abuse:

- ▶ Syrian authorities continued to raid and harass homosexuals in Syria.
- ▶ Raids escalated in 2007.
- ▶ In 2010, a major arrest occurred. 32 men were arrested at a private gay party, and were kept under custody without being charged of a criminal offense for three months.
- ▶ Other incidents involving the arrest and harassment of homosexuals and cross-dressers continued.

Lesbian Life (2000s): No Change

- ▶ No changes in the marriage law or age of consent
- ▶ More forced marriages
- ▶ Clerics (Christian or Muslim religious leaders) have more power

Religion and its Effects

- ▶ The Syrian constitution stated that “Islamic Sharia was a source of legislation”, but in 2012 the constitution was altered to read that “Islamic Sharia is the main source of legislation.”
- ▶ Syrian clerics held more power in the 2000s.
- ▶ Priests advised families to enforce curfews and to subject their gay sons to therapy.
- ▶ Sheikhs (Muslim religious leaders) did just as the priests, but also forced gay men to come to mosques or religious lectures.
- ▶ Arranged/forced marriages were strongly encouraged by clerics.



The Unrest

2011 - PRESENT

Militia abuse:

- ▶ Some Syrian civil society activists reported gay killings by radical groups to Human Rights organizations in late 2012. However, those reports are now missing.
- ▶ Groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other groups executed several gay men in Syria.
- ▶ ISIL (*Islamic State In Levant*) is the first group to publish videos and photos of gay killings. Other groups followed.
- ▶ Several gay men who escaped ISIL-controlled areas in Syria reported that ISIL has its own criteria for victims:
 - ▶ Kill the “more masculine” men,
 - ▶ Keep the “effeminate” men, especially if those men are young.
- ▶ The passive gay men are sent to the emir (leader) possibly for sexual purposes.



REASONS

WHAT DRIVES REFUGEES TO FLEE

Reasons

- ▶ WAR
- ▶ Terrorism
- ▶ Extreme Homophobia
- ▶ Religious Intolerance

Results of Homophobia

- ▶ Social Isolation
- ▶ Psychological Traumatization
- ▶ Rejection by Family
- ▶ Economic Paralysis
- ▶ Lack of Support
- ▶ Options
 - ▶ Try to Change/Get Married
 - ▶ Live in Hiding
 - ▶ Suicide
 - ▶ Escape

Escape

- ▶ Why:
 - ▶ Save Your Life
 - ▶ Escape Homophobia and Family Rejection
 - ▶ Find Your True Self
- ▶ Where: Turkey is the Hub
 - ▶ Homosexuality was Decriminalized in 1858 under the Ottomans
 - ▶ Easy Passage from Neighboring Countries
- ▶ How:
 - ▶ Crossing Borders
 - ▶ Smuggling
 - ▶ Legal Travel (Visa Waiver Agreements)

Temporary Stay in Country of Transit

- ▶ Mentally Traumatized State
 - ▶ Leaving Everything They Know Behind
 - ▶ Escaping Threats of Physical Harm or Incarceration
 - ▶ Finding the Courage to Leave as Circumstances Leave you with No Choice
 - ▶ Financial Conditions – Lack of Support, and No Employment Opportunities
 - ▶ Travel Outside of Syria May Require Illegal Actions
 - ▶ Smuggling Costs
 - ▶ Risk and Danger-Induced Trauma

Temporary Stay in Country of Transit

(cont'd)

- ▶ New Place/Culture/Language, Lack of Legal Status
 - ▶ Violence & harassment by other refugees and by locals
 - ▶ Language Barrier (Turkish)
 - ▶ Job/Money
 - ▶ Sex Work
 - ▶ Working illegally – possible harassment and abuse by employer
 - ▶ High Cost of Living, Compared to Very Low Income
 - ▶ Poor Accommodations
 - ▶ Social Isolation as a Result of Remaining in the Closet
 - ▶ No Legal or Medical Support, and no clear support from any organization

Resettlement and Challenges

- ▶ How Long: 3 Years to 12 years to Forever
- ▶ UNHCR Procedures in Turkey:
 - ▶ Status Determination (4 Phases)
 - ▶ 1) Pre-Registration with an NGO
 - ▶ 2) Registration with UNHCR
 - ▶ 3) Refugee Status Determination
 - ▶ 4) Resettlement Interview
 - ▶ Referral to a Resettlement Country (2+ yrs)
 - ▶ Resettlement & Integration
- ▶ Resettlement Challenges
 - ▶ Unknown Future
 - ▶ Long-Term Stay with no Results
 - ▶ Travel Restrictions on Refugees: Permission Required to Leave Assigned City
 - ▶ Mandatory Reporting to Police on Weekly Basis
 - ▶ Financial support throughout the UNHCR Process

Coming to the U.S. (My Story)

- ▶ Detoxification:
 - ▶ Self-Acceptance
 - ▶ Knowing That No One Will Harm You For Being Who You Are
 - ▶ Feeling Safe and Belonging
- ▶ Integration:
 - ▶ Filing Government Paperwork
 - ▶ Finding the Right Circles
 - ▶ Work and Stability
- ▶ Finding One's Self:
 - ▶ Helping Other Refugees, Advocating for Equality
 - ▶ Falling in Love

What You Can Do

- ▶ Volunteer
 - ▶ Direct Refugee Assistance
 - ▶ Communication & Outreach
 - ▶ Nonprofit Management
 - ▶ Assist a Newly-Arrived Refugee
- ▶ Establish a Relationship Between NGOs (i.e. ORAM, IRC, UNHCR) and your department



Q&A