

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

In Iran the story is not about the oppression of homosexuality, it is about the oppression of sexuality... In Iran anything that has to do with sex is considered taboo... There is an ongoing censorship within the community and sexual issues are not openly discussed... There is a sick belief that everybody is trying to sleep with everybody else... We also need to talk about the fact that women are extremely oppressed in this system and about the fact that there is no sexual freedom even for heterosexual people.

An Interview with Hossein Alizadeh

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Meeting room of the *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* in New York City

Hossein Alizadeh: My name is Hossein Alizadeh, I am the Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator for the *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* (IGLHRC). I began working here four years ago as the Communications Coordinator, focusing primarily on Iran and Iraq because of the crisis there at that time. In 2009, we decided to start an independent Middle East and North Africa program and I became the dedicated full-time staff member working on that project. Our main office is here in New York City, but we have offices in Argentina and South Africa, as well as a field officer working from the Philippines. My program is coordinated from New York and work with people and volunteers in different countries as well as colleagues from other groups.

Carlos Motta: What is the mission of this organization? What is it working for or against?

HA: When *IGLHRC* started its work twenty-one years ago there were no human rights or mainstream organizations working on LGBT rights violations. Our founder began working as an activist when she was a college student and heard about the arrest of gay people in Russia. She wrote to *Amnesty International* (AI), asking them to support the Russians who were detained because of their sexual orientation and was told that LGBT issues were not that organization's focus. She got angry and started a movement in her own kitchen that evolved to become *IGLHRC*. She wanted to draw attention to daily violations committed against the rights of people because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Since then, we have been trying to keep that focus but the battle has thankfully changed because there are so many organizations working on LGBT rights. *AI* and *Human Rights Watch* (HRW) now have their own dedicated LGBT programs and there are many groups both nationally and internationally doing this kind of work. We decided to take initiative to bring these various groups together so we do a lot of international advocacy and coordination between regional and national work.

CM: Is the organization a non-governmental organization, and how is it funded?

HA: *IGLHRC* is a non-profit organization. During the first few years there were no paid staff members; everybody was a volunteer. Thank God that has changed. The majority of our funds

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

come from foundations mainly located in the United States but we are also generously supported by some international organizations. The Swedish and Norwegian governments provide a lot of funding for our Africa program, for example. Last year, we became the first and only U.S. based LGBT non-profit member observer at United Nations. Our observer status with the United Nations came after almost three years of war between different countries. Not everybody was pleased to see a LGBT group become a consulted member of the committee so there was fighting back and forth, but we managed to secure that important status. We get money from United States donors as well but individual donations constitute fewer than thirty percent of our budget.

CM: What are the ideological foundations of the organization?

HA: I do not know if it is ideological, I would say it is a concept, which is still our motto “Human Rights for everyone, everywhere.” The idea is simple as that, we are not asking for specific rights or privileges for LGBT people. What we are asking is that when you have citizens that are entitled to rights, those rights are for everybody regardless of whether they are straight or gay. At first this does not look obvious, but it becomes much more obvious. “Freedom of Assembly,” for example, is a right, guaranteed to citizens in multiple countries and yet the government will not allow gay people to have a party. On what basis? If there is “Freedom of Assembly,” no part of the Constitution or penal code says certain citizens are not allowed to benefit from this right.

The same thing happens with “Freedom of Expression.” If you get arrested, the law should be applied in the same manner it is applied to anybody else, you should be able to get a lawyer, not fear mistreatment, and the government cannot arrest you because they do not like you, if you have not committed a crime. These basic principles for all human beings are inherently sacred and this is what we are trying to promote and communicate in multiple countries.

CM: How do you implement this project? Is it mostly advocacy and lobbying or do you develop specific social and community projects in different places?

HA: We decided early on that because of our location as a U.S. based organization, we did not want to parachute into other countries and tell people what to do. We work with countries where there is a dynamic and ordinary conversation happening and believe local activists should decide how to proceed. We look to support these processes, which is sometimes as easy as connecting local activists to funding organizations, helping with international visibility and circulating press releases, providing trainings and workshops, or introducing them to mechanisms within the United Nations. There are many levels of support, but we do not impose our methods or judgments on countries, so if activists are not ready or willing to take the strategy we feel is best, we do not impose it on them, we try to negotiate and work with them to come up with solutions that are meaningful for them.

CM: Earlier you mentioned your current role focuses on the Middle East and North Africa, and on Iran and Iraq in particular. What is the crisis you referred to and what is your organization doing in this regard?

HA: Unfortunately this is an ongoing situation and it is only getting worse. The problems in the Middle East differ slightly in each country. With Iran and Iraq, you have the deadly combination of cultural homophobia and religious intolerance. Iran is different from Iraq because Iran has a

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

government in power that imposes religious law, which classifies sex between two men as a crime punishable by death. The death penalty for sodomy, and many other laws, are repeatedly utilized to intimidate, harass, and penalize the gay and lesbian community in Iran. In Iraq, it is different because it is vigilantes rather than the government that are going after gay people. Self-appointed religious forces decide that gays are destroying the fabrics of their society so they take it upon themselves to hunt gay people. This has been going on in Iraq since 2003. The U.S. invasion of that country and the underground situations are very bad because in Iraq judgment is left up to the people. You can go after anyone and accuse them of being gay. We try to work with activists underground and provide a lot of support for the refugees, people who are forced to leave their country, from Iran and Iraq, to get as much as we can to those people in need.

CM: You are from Iran, correct?

HA: I am Iranian, yes.

CM: Did your leaving Iran have anything to do with your sexual orientation?

HA: No, it was not related to that. I came here on a college scholarship and stayed after finishing my degree. I was not actually persecuted, but many people are forced to leave the country or it comes to a point they can no longer safely stay in the country. They are harassed and intimidated by their own family members. There is a lot of "honor killing"; if they find out you are gay, they come to kill you because they feel you are dishonoring the entire family. There have also been government cases where people are persecuted by the government, harassed, or raped. My case was benign compared to these instances, but the moment I came here and I decided to embrace my sexuality, I realized it is not safe for me to go back there.

CM: What is life in Iran like in terms of being able to live a sexually open life? Is there an underground community or a space where people are gathering unofficially?

HA: Yes and no. Like most countries on the planet you have freedom as long as you have resources. If you have money you can bribe the police so they do not come and bother you. You can have access to exclusive places and that is why you have a very affluent, rather comfortable gay community in Iran, Iraq and many other countries in the region. This comfort is atypical of the rest of the population. If you are lucky and you have money, you can do what you want, gay or straight. But if you are a working class or middle-class family to put it mildly, you are screwed.

There are a couple of places for people who do not belong to that high society, which are known gay hang outs, but you do it at your own risk. The police might raid the place any minute or even some guy might try to blackmail you, which is a serious problem in both countries. I have seen people start a relationship and have a few romantic encounters with a person they liked, and when things moved a little bit further, they started receiving letters or calls taunting their desire to have sex with other men and demanding money while threatening to call the police. It is psychologically very devastating, like walking on a minefield never knowing when you are going to explode. You always have to watch out for what is ahead of you; anxiousness becomes a way of life.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

The other part is the structural violence that exists. You may not be directly persecuted by the government, but you know you are different, you know the death penalty can be enforced by anyone at anytime. You are being treated, as a stranger to society because people, even your family, feel it is not okay. You have no legal protection within society, are harassed and intimidated on a daily basis and often this takes the form of sexually suggestive comments.

Oppression does not need to be in the form of the death penalty. The fear of having that doomsday scenario plus the day-to-day stress is enough to make many people totally give up the situation, commit suicide, or leave the country. If you are able to have people show up to a party, the police raid the party, everybody is arrested, beaten up, and tortured. Suddenly your boyfriend's father finds out you are gay. You have violated their honor and they are looking for you with a knife, to kill you. Good luck if you can get support from anybody else in the society. Most people feel very vulnerable and helpless on top of the negative propaganda by media that is controlled by the government and religious offices; all telling you are committing a crime and a sin. With all these negative messages, you have no self-confidence either.

CM: Has the situation been consistently like this in the last several decades? Specifically in Iran, has it worsened, or improved recently?

HA: In the case of Iran it is a sad yet interesting story. Until 1979, under the previous regime there was no penalty for homosexuality so they had a relatively easier time. The government was not religious and there was no attempt to impose religious laws. The government was trying to come across as progressive so they did not really care about your sexuality. You were free to do whatever you wanted. Consumption of alcohol and having parties was also allowed and there was no reason for the police to raid your home.

The legal system in Iran was written and based on the Belgian legal system, with the minor difference that Persian is a gender-neutral language. When you speak in Persian you talk about "someone." This happened to me recently when I was talking to one of my friends that I believed was gay, but I was not sure. He began to tell me about his new relationship with someone from China and after thirty minutes of conversation, I still didn't know if he was gay or straight because he was not referring to a *gender* but to a *someone*. It is impolite to ask the gender, so that ambiguity was used in favor of the gay movement. In 1977 you had the first legally recognized gay marriage anywhere on this planet in Iran. The law said marriage was a union between two people without specifying the gender of these two people and the court decided there was no reason not to allow two men who wanted to get married. The 1977 Iran, at least on the surface, was more progressive than what it is now. I am hoping the future will change for better, but for the past three decades, the society has gone through a very rough patch.

CM: Is there something in the script, or religious doctrine in Iran that condemns homosexuality directly or is it something that is derived from a kind of moral understanding of its relationship to religion?

HA: Good question. It is a little bit of both. There are scholars that argue the only reference in the text is about the story of Lot, where there is a vague reference to homosexuality, but it is not really an extended conversation. Traditionally it was understood that this talk is about homosexuality. For the past twenty years there have been new generations of scholars arguing against this theory. Some of them bluntly argue that there is no penalty for homosexuals, this is

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

not based on the Western understanding of the stories, it is all theological debates going on locally. There are other scholars that have questioned the whole traditional understanding of the penalty for homosexuality and I have seen two or three high ranking clergy people argue they don't understand the issue of homosexuality and feel there needs to be more studies to decide whether it is really a crime or not. These debates happen within religious circles, but it remains in the margins despite the opinions of these heavy weights. Overall, the religious establishment is very traditional.

CM: How do they sustain the rhetoric of homophobia based on the word of God?

HA: In Iran the story is not about the oppression of *homosexuality*, it is about the oppression of *sexuality*. An undergraduate professor of mine who is currently the head of the human rights institute in Iran and a very religious man told me, that in Iran, you cannot even mention sex. Anything that has to do with sex is considered taboo. Even though the scripture is very comfortable talking about sex, society is so conservative when talking about any sort of sexual relationship. It took ten years to decide about protection for heterosexual relationships. There is an ongoing censorship within the community and issues are not openly discussed. For heterosexual men, it is impossible to go out with their girlfriends. As a teenager when going somewhere with my sister who is two years older than me, I had to have my I.D. with me because we assumed we would be stopped by the morality police to ask what our relationship is. There is a kind of sick belief that everybody is trying to sleep with everybody else. That is just the sad reality that is affecting everybody's life. We also need to talk about the fact that women are extremely oppressed in this system and about the fact that there is no sexual freedom even for heterosexual people.

Homosexuals are being harshly treated and there is no denial of that, but even heterosexuals are not free. There are steps that need to be taken in order to eliminate oppression and the society is moving in that direction. In the past few years there has been pressure from the bottom to talk about sexuality. For the first time you have higher clergymen that talk about sex and you can discuss your sexual preferences and sexual things with them. Ten years ago this was unthinkable. This is a social dilemma that the entire society is struggling with.

CM: Did feminist and gay and lesbian movements in the West have any ripples in the Middle East, particularly in Iran? Were these theories and ideas traveling there? If so, how were they perceived?

HA: Yes and no. Yes because you see it in a lot of intellectual circles. But "Intellectual" is sometimes a very nasty word because it has the connotation that these people are all Western oriented, fluent in multiple languages and disconnected from the rest of society. They are perceived as a very small group of people who speak the language of the West, while the majority of society is left out.

I would say the most important movements are by those who try to internalize those debates and the few people who have done that have been relatively successful. You cannot, however, argue that this is a direct influence of the feminism movement; it is a localized version and unfortunately it is not strong enough. Still there is a lot of copying, but what is considered to be relevant in the West is culturally irrelevant for many people in other countries so you have to always try to translate, not only literally, but also culturally in a way that people can relate to and

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

understand. When you talk about women in the U.S. you have “Freedom of Choice,” for example. The reality that women can move out of their house at age eighteen and go somewhere else is a freedom most men do not even have in Middle Eastern societies. You live with your parents as long as you are single. You marry at the age of twenty or thirty and move to the next familial stage. There is no separation and the concept of family is very different so when you talk about feminism, you have to translate it in a way that people can relate and see that you are talking about them.

CM: Is lesbianism also criminalized, or is something that is not talked about publicly?

HA: That is one of those tricky questions because it is penalized, but in most countries, the penalty is much lighter for women than men. In the case of Iran for example you have the death penalty for men having sex with each other, but for women it is one hundred lashes.

CM: Having sex means having anal intercourse or any form of sexual contact?

HA: The way the law is written says that any penetration is punishable. To conclude two men had intercourse, it can either be anal penetration or what they describe as “rubbing between the two legs.” In order to prove either, you need to have four witnesses, which is always *the key*. Witnesses need to show up in the court of law, and tell the judge independently that they witnessed the act with their own eyes. It cannot be that two people went to the bed, but that they actually penetrated each other. If you only have three people that are willing to testify or you have four people who have different testimonies, guess what happens? The witnesses will be punished, not the people, because this is a serious crime. You cannot just show up in the court and accuse your neighbor. The accusation should not be based on speculation; it should be based on eyewitness accounts.

Many legal experts say this law is not a problem because it is written in a way that is next to impossible to get the conviction. You cannot rely on the medical examiner's report and other evidence is not admissible in the court. They say it is impossible to prove so not to worry. The problem is that the court does not follow the letter of the law. I have seen cases where there are no witnesses, or where they accuse people of rape, and there is no victim. When you rape someone the understanding is there are two people involved, you cannot rape yourself! That is not what the court says; they convict someone as a rapist and issue the death sentence.

Then there is the fact that you cannot issue the death sentence on people under the age of eighteen, but they do it any way. There is also the issue of whether this was a willing act, if you made a mature choice or you were coerced, so certain conditions are supposed to be met. None of them are really followed in the legal system and that is one of our constant criticisms, that even by their own standards the way the government goes after people is illegal. When I talk about four witnesses, the four witnesses have to be at the court during the hearing. Pre-trial investigations are not admissible and I have seen, again, cases that rely on pre-trial investigation.

Many conditions in theory are in place to protect individuals and their privacy, but in reality the laws are being abused on a daily basis. I have also seen people who are not gay, but the government wants to get rid of them, so they arrest and torture them until they confess to being gay. At the moment you confess to being gay, the society will walk away from supporting you

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

because of homophobia. This has been so abused that the entire system becomes a sad joke unfortunately.

CM: How many people are condemned to death because of sexual acts?

HA: In countries like Iran, they have been doing magic with the way that they the legal system works. First of all you don't hear anybody talking about execution of two consenting adults, there is always a rape story. Imagine that you are with somebody and both men are having sex, you get arrested and if you want to escape, the easiest excuse you have is to say that you were raped. You always have to take rape with a grain of salt because the system is oppressive to begin with.

The second thing is that other irrelevant factors are introduced in the case. People we know are not drug dealers are accused of drug trafficking. These are often political activists and the drug charge is introduced to legitimize the punishment of crime when there is no crime to begin with. You also have other lame excuses. Three years ago the morality police attacked a gay party and arrested close to a hundred people. They went in with cameras thinking it was going to be an orgy and they would film everything as evidence to execute everybody. When they entered all they could find was a party with some cross dressers and a few bottles of alcohol. After torturing and arresting people and keeping them in custody for a few weeks they could not come up with any legitimate charges so they tried people for drinking alcohol.

The same thing is happening right now Bahrain. They target gay parties and charge people with smoking pot, drinking alcohol, cross dressing, violating morality, and all sorts of phony baloney accusations that have nothing do with sexuality, but everyone knows why they are being arrested. The government tries to frame you. You can never know how many people have been executed because the exact charges are complicated.

What you do know is the government goes after its citizens because they are gay. The worst part is that most of these people do not have access to lawyers during the trial or only have access to lawyers who are not willing to work on these cases; pro-bono lawyers who do not care if you are dead or alive. At the end of the trial if you want to investigate independently verified information, nobody is willing to talk to you. I had one case recently where we tried to contact the family members, but the family is so afraid of the wire-tapping, they feel the government is listening to their conversations. They also feel embarrassed their son is gay so refuse to talk about the issue. There are so many layers of problems making it impossible for us to determine the real cause of the arrest.

CM: Can you go back and tell me more about the penalization of a lesbian relationship?

HA: Sure. In many countries you have a milder punishment for lesbians. Theories say that because it is a male dominated society where men are the top of the hierarchy, if a man turns out to be gay, he does not want to be a man but a woman, so he is downgrading himself, and this should be punished. If a lesbian wants to sleep with another woman she is not really downgrading herself because she is already a second-class citizen, so something will be done but not as serious. That is the legal analysis, but then you have the reality of the endless oppression of women.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

I have interviewed lesbians that do not want to get married to a straight man, but as a woman this fate has already been decided so they have to get married, they do not have a choice. There is also a lot of “honor killing” of women and it does not get reported to the authorities. This is not only in a conservative society like Iran, this happens across the Middle East. The woman is considered the honor and property of the family so she must behave. The police will not intervene because it is considered family business, and not the place of authorities to investigate. There is a lot of oppression like that, which is happening under the surface. It is unreported and undocumented and people who are lesbians do not even know they have rights. Women are told they must follow whatever the family wants to do in order to be a good woman. They must deny any urges in order to be like everybody else. There is another extremely important part, which is financial dependence. As a man it is easier for you to walk away from your family and find a job. As a woman, you are more prone to rape and exploitation so you have to rely on other people, especially if you are coming from an underprivileged background without an education.

CM: Is it somehow easier for women to have secret relationships because of the way society is structured and divided by gender?

HA: Strangely yes, but again it is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, you know that you are considered an inferior being, a second-class citizen because you are a woman, but this also makes you invisible, which allows you to be with other women. I have seen that in many countries from Iraq and Iran, to the United Emirates. It is safer but it is not dignified. You do not want to be just a sexual being, you are a full multi-dimensional human being and you want to be recognized as such, but you cannot be. So it is safer to have a secret romantic relationship with another woman, but you are always risking the fact that if you are exposed, you will be totally marginalized or even killed. As a woman you don't have the same rights as men.

CM: It is known that the situation for transsexual people in Iran is different than in many places because if you choose to change your gender, you are allowed to pass as either man or woman. Can you explain this?

HA: We still don't know if this is a blessing or a curse. In a way it is a blessing because at least you are not criminalized. It all started with one person, a man who felt he was in the wrong body. He did not think about going to an international community, writing a book about his story or anything, he just kept saying, “I want to be a woman,” and he was told he was crazy, but he insisted it was urgent. He tried for five or six years to have a meeting with the highest-ranking clergyman in Iran to explain his situation. He argued with the clergyman that he was a woman born in a male body, so following religious doctrine, hanging out with other men would be exposing himself. This argument worked and the high-ranking clergyman issued a religious decree saying that if medical experts confirmed his claims, his gender could be surgically reassigned. Prior to his case there was no term for transgender in the language of the clergymen in Iran. In many countries in the Middle East it is still criminalized, people are called “the third gender” and all sorts of stigmas are attached to this.

Since this has been implemented in Iran, thousands of people have gone through gender reassignment, but there are a few tricky aspects. The first point is that a transgender person can only get out of its miserable situation by undergoing the gender reassignment surgery. I have talked to people who do not want to be surgically reassigned but that is not an option.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

The second point is that the government does not really allow these surgeries because they care about gender identity. They allow them because they have a binary gender model, where you are either a man or a woman. If there was a mistake in the creation and you were born in the wrong gender; the government agrees to “fix” you. This is a selfish motive for the government to “fix” society and protect the morality of the people, and individuals suffer a lot because of this process.

Think about it, you are born a man, so even though you feel you are transgender, the society perceives you as male, and as a male you have privileges. When you decide to have the surgery, the government subsidizes the whole process, but the first thing you realize is you are now a second-class citizen as a woman. You have changed your gender and feel better, but are now considered nothing. You have to cover your head everywhere you go and you have limits you never had before. There have been cases of people who decided to reverse the surgery because they could not live like that. The good part is that you are not criminalized; the bad part is there is no human rights perspective about the situation of transgendered people.

CM: The picture that you have drawn of Iran is rather grim. Is the situation similar throughout the region, and also in North Africa since you also work with that area?

HA: Unfortunately, the picture is grim and it is only getting grimmer. There are hopeful exceptions to that, countries like Lebanon happen to enjoy relative freedom. In Lebanon you have a mosaic of ethnicities and religions. It is a small country but within that small country you have a President who is always Christian, a Prime Minister who is Sunni Muslim, and The Speaker of the Parliament who is always a Shiite Muslim. This creates interesting dynamics and people are politically and socially more active. Even though Lebanon has the sodomy law, there is a very vibrant LGBT movement. They are not registered, but they are tolerated and have allies within the government like the Minister of Health for example. They have partnerships with other international groups and they have offices with a visible presence. There are hotlines, social services, and parties, everything in Beirut.

CM: Are there are gay bars and clubs?

HA: Yes. The LGBT movement does not run them, but they are part of the community. This is an exception for the region. Turkey is similar, and there is a debate whether to include Turkey as part of the Middle East, but we do. It was my insistence that Turkey should be considered part of the region because even though they are trying to join Europe, their religious and cultural backgrounds are more relevant to the Middle East. You have no sodomy law in Turkey, you have multiple LGBT groups that are legally registered and active, but you have an extremely homophobic and transphobic society that does not tolerate gay people. There is huge discrimination against people that are considered gay and the government does not do anything to protect the LGBT community. There have been endless cases of murder especially of transgender people in the past few years. There is also systematic discrimination where employers do not hire you if you are gay or transgender. This is in a country where sex work is legal, but transgender people are not even allowed to engage in sex work.

Turkey wants to join the European Union so they pretend to be progressive, but as you can imagine it is very difficult for people to survive. Still, the society remains very involved and active, and there are groups that are defending the rights of LGBT people. There are non-profit

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

LGBT groups in Turkey that are active. Unfortunately, in most other countries you do not see similar signals. Everything is under the radar, very quiet movements that are happening mainly at an individual level or people who are active outside the country but do not dare to do anything inside their own country. It is a very unsafe environment where police monitor everything including emails and communications.

CM: Do you consider Israel to be part of the Middle East?

HA: Yes it is part of the Middle East and Israel perhaps is an exception. There is always the sensitivity around the presence of LGBT groups from Israel because of the ongoing tension between Israelis and Palestinians. Unfortunately, they have not been able to communicate with each other so Israeli groups do not have the expectation to be included. I do not know if a peace treaty is going to solve that problem or not to be honest, but as of now you must chose to either work with Israeli groups or with the rest of the Middle Eastern LGBT communities. Most of our partners do not want to deal with Israeli groups. Part of it is political; if you are known to work with Israeli LGBT groups you will be marginalized. In countries like Lebanon with a very vibrant civil society environment, having ties with Israel is the kiss of death because the two countries are still at war. You also have to keep in mind the “conspiracy theory” that situates homosexuality as a non-indigenous concept, a ploy by Western governments and Israelis to undermine Middle Eastern societies. It sounds like crazy talk, but in Arabic newspapers you see stories like this everyday. With this negative mindset, if an Arab LGBT group tries to contact an Israeli group, it begins to be perceived in a way that gives proof and weight to the conspiracy theory argument.

CM: That reminds me of the Communist Party saying that homosexuality was a product of capitalism.

HA: It is pretty much the same, this idea that homosexuality comes from somewhere or someone else. In the Middle East it is a very convenient way to blame everything on the Zionists and make Zionists responsible for the homosexuality of our people so it is a very tricky situation for activists on both sides.

CM: With all the challenges you have outlined for communities in the Middle East, what is a strategic plan of action? It seems the situation is really stuck in the sense that you cannot change religious logic from one day to the other. How are social movements forming? What is possible?

HA: That is the million-dollar question. I would say as dark as the situation is, there is a growing movement with the main challenge being that in most countries in the Middle East you don't have an open conversation about sexuality to begin with. People do not feel comfortable talking about sexuality in general or the agency people have over their own body, so you do not even get to the issue of homosexuality. Starting this conversation is a priority and I think this conversation is getting started. We are not there yet, but in the past decade, seeing the growing number of groups that are either directly or indirectly talking about these issues.

Even in countries like Iran where the President comes to New York and says there are no homosexuals in Iran, a hotline has been created for family crisis, which includes offering counseling for people who feel they are gay. For the first time you see a conversation about

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

homosexuality in a non-criminal language, it is a medical approach and it is not what we are looking for, but it is a step forward. At least you are not being killed or targeted. It is still a vulnerable population and they may try to put you in a shelter or something, which may provide some sort of support, it is not ideal, but it is better than getting killed.

We can also look at language. Ten, fifteen years ago there was no word in Arabic or Persian that could describe homosexuality. You had negative lexicons that existed in order for people to talk about homosexuality, but now that landscape has changed. The groups both outside the region, and inside the region have produced cultural literature that addresses language and provides positive words to talk about homosexuality.

CM: What is the word in Farsi?

HA: In Farsi when I was growing up, the politest word was “Hamjens baz” (س باز), which is really a derogatory term. “Hamjens” means “same sex” and “baz” means somebody who is chasing someone, so the connotation is like you a “womanizer,” but for homosexuals it would be a “manizer.” It is a very negative and sexualizing term. Now you have the word “Hamjens Gara” (گرا), which literally means “oriented towards members of the same sex.” It does not have that *chasing* factor anymore that connoted a horny being that just wants to have sex. In Arabic the politest word was “Shaz Jinsi” (نسي), which literally means “sexually unnatural.” In Iraq the term was the same as that for “son of a bitch.” Now you have the word “Mithli” (لي), which means “interested in the same gender.”

There is now positive language and in recent years less mainstream media are talking about *killing* gay people. Instead they are talking about *curing* them, which again is not where we want to be, but with a vulnerable population with nowhere to turn, I would say it is better to live in a society where people want to *treat* them rather than *kill* them.

There have also been places where cultural movements are happening and civil society is gaining support for sexual minorities. This is seen in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and to some extent in Turkey. It is encouraging that there are different countries trying to negotiate the space for LGBT people. That is a century behind where we are in the United States but you have to start somewhere.