



## Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization (PGLO)

by Arsham Parsi

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The Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization (PGLO) is a support group and activist organization, registered in Norway and soon to be headquartered in Toronto, Canada, that advocates for civil and human rights for Iranian glbtq people around the world. It is an official member of the European-based International Gay and Lesbian Association.

The organization evolved from an Iranian Internet community called the Rainbow Group, which formed in 2001. The Rainbow Group aimed to educate its readers about issues facing sexual minorities in Iran, who routinely experience discrimination and oppression, including imprisonment, torture, and even execution.

In 2003, the Rainbow Group evolved into the PGLO, changing its name to recognize the inclusion of Persian lesbians in its mandate. It launched an educational website that attracted 150 visitors per day. However, the Islamic government soon banned the site.

Given the censorship practiced by the government, and the draconian penalties for homosexual activities in Iran, the PGLO officially registered as an organization in Norway, from which it launched a new website and began its international activities on behalf of glbtq Iranians around the world. Most its members and associates remain in Iran, which is the target of most of the organization's educational and support activities, but the PGLO is also concerned with the difficulties faced by Iranian refugees all over the world, many of whom flee to the Western democracies to escape persecution on the basis of their sexuality in Iran.

The PGLO helps distribute an online magazine, *MAHA* (Homosexual e-magazine), and publishes a more sophisticated print magazine, *CHERAGH* (Insight), which attempts to chronicle Persian culture. It also broadcasts a weekly radio program on the Internet called *RAHA*, which means "Liberated." It hopes soon to broadcast the radio program by satellite as well, thereby reaching those without access to the Internet.

The organization's Human Rights Office addresses immigration issues, especially the particular problems of homosexual refugees from Iran, often collaborating with glbtq groups in other countries in order to assist those who have fled Iran, often in fear of their lives.

### Conditions in Iran

The need for PGLO's work is obvious, given the abysmal conditions in Iran for its glbtq citizens under the current Islamic government. The atmosphere of intolerance in Iran and the government's policy of censorship means that many people have little or no accurate information about sexual issues and identity. This lack of information about sexuality prevents many Persian homosexuals from envisioning the possibility of a better life and of making plans to achieve a brighter future.

Glbtq Iranians live in various circumstances, social classes, and geographies. Unfortunately, most of the



Arsham Parsi,  
Spokesperson and  
Secretary of Human  
Rights Affairs for the  
Persian Gay and Lesbian  
Organization.  
Courtesy Arsham Parsi.

research about glbtq people in Iran focuses exclusively on the capital city of Teheran, and often on the northern, most affluent area of the city. PGLO hopes to reach glbtq individuals all over the country, not just in the largest cities.

Iranian glbtq people suffer not only from the Islamic government's laws, but also frequently experience persecution in family life, in the workplace, and in other aspects of their lives. If their sexual orientation or gender identity is discovered, glbtq people are often abandoned by their families and are fired from their employment. Suicide is not uncommon when this happens.

Lesbians often live lives of great desperation. They are frequently forced to marry through family pressure. Those who show no interest in sexual relations with their husbands are accused of failing to obey their husbands, which is grounds for divorce. They are frequently subject to humiliation and beatings.

Because there are no gay bars or other public meeting places for homosexuals, gay men sometimes resort to cruising parks, which are often raided. Those suspected of cruising are routinely beaten and humiliated.

Iran recognizes transsexuality as a mental and physical disorder and permits sexual reassignment surgery, but it regards same-sex sexual expression as a crime.

Criminal punishments such as imprisonment, torture, and even execution for homosexual activity are real threats. Not only is death prescribed by Islam for homosexual penetration, but even kissing "with lust" is forbidden. The government sometimes defends its harsh laws by insisting that they are "in writing, and not actually enforced." However, the barbaric laws awake a great fear in the heart of every aware homosexual, for despite the government's claim, they are often enforced.

Because of the silencing of any discussion of sexuality, many glbtq people do not realize the danger they are in until they are arrested or victimized by the system. In 2005, for example, two teenagers, Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, were hanged in the northeastern city of Mashhad. Most likely after being interrogated and tortured, the boys admitted to having sex with each other and stated that they were not aware that homosexuality was punishable by death. Prior to their execution, the teenagers were held in prison for 14 months and were severely beaten.

The length of their detention suggests that they had committed the so-called offenses more than a year earlier, when they were around the age of 16. Thanks to the power of the global media, the terrifying and tragic photos of the teens' last moments were released on the Internet. In these photos, the two adolescents were behind the fence of a police van, weeping hopelessly as it carried them off to be executed.

### **PGLO's Future**

PGLO's relocation of its headquarters to Toronto promises to usher in a new period of growth and activism. It hopes to work with other glbtq and human rights organizations in order to continue to educate Iranians about issues of sexuality and to bring the persecution of homosexuals in Iran to the attention of the world.

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Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization Website. [www.pglo.net](http://www.pglo.net)

### **About the Author**

Arsham Parsi is the Spokesperson and Secretary of Human Rights Affairs for the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization. He lives in Toronto.