
We're Here

Iraqi LGBT People's Accounts of Violence and Rights Abuse



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TERMINOLOGY

Sexual Orientation: A person's capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender, the same gender, or more than one gender.¹

Gender Identity: A person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical, or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.²

LGBT: An acronym that represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This acronym frequently replaces the term gay, and is constantly developing as activists are seeking to be inclusive of individual experiences by adding, for example, "Q," which represents queer, and "I," which represents intersex.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity and/or expression does not or is perceived to not match stereotypical gender norms associated with his or her assigned gender at birth. A transgender person can be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or any other sexual orientation.

Brothels/Sex-working Houses: A physical place where persons may go to engage in sexual activity with other persons in exchange for money or goods. Such places may have a cover, especially in conservative societies, such as by being a massage center or bar, in order to hide the nature of their activities.

Heterosexual: A person with the capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, persons of a different gender.

Homosexual: A person with the capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, persons of the same gender. It is sometimes used synonymously with "gay" or "lesbian," but currently, the latter terms are preferred in many circles.

Lesbian: A female-identified individual with the capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, other female-identified individuals.

Gay: A male-identified individual with the capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, other male-identified individuals. This term has also been historically used as an adjective to describe lesbians.

Bisexual: A person with the capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, persons who are either male- or female-identified.

Sex Worker: Female, male, and transgender adults who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally. Sex work may vary in the degree to which it is "formal" or organized. It is important to note that sex work is consensual sex between adults, which takes many forms and varies between and within countries and communities.³

Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI): STIs are caused by more than thirty different bacteria, viruses, and parasites and are spread predominantly by sexual contact, including vaginal, anal, and oral sex.⁴ They are sometimes referred to as STDs, or sexually transmitted diseases, though not all STIs lead to disease. Safer sex implements, such as condoms, play a key role in helping to prevent the spread of STIs.

1 International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Yogyakarta Principles - Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, March 2007, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/48244e602.html> [accessed 25 March 2014].

2 Ibid.

3 "Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions," World Health Organization (2013), available at http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/sti/sex_worker_implementation/swit_intro.pdf?ua=1. [accessed 25 March 2014].

4 "Sexually Transmitted Infections: Fact Sheet 100," World Health Organization (November 2013) available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs110/en/> [accessed 25 March 2014].

TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE LGBT INDIVIDUALS IN IRAQ

Sister	/Ukhut /	أخت
Old sister	/Baji /	باجي
Puppy.....	/Jarū/	جرو
.....	/Teo/	طيو
Faggot.....	/ Looti/	لوطي
Top	/Mujab /	موجب
Shemale	/Mukhanath/	مخنث
Bottom	/Salib /	سالب
Shame	/A'ar/	عار
Chick	/Farikh /	فرخ

Of these terms, only sister (ukhut) and old sister (baji) are considered acceptable. This is because the LGBT community itself uses these words. The term sister refers to a gay man, and the term big sister refers to a gay man who is older than forty. The rest of the terms are considered insulting to various degrees. For example, the terms puppy (jaru) and chick (farikh) are meant to compare gay people to small, vulnerable animals.

Terms such as top (mujab) and bottom (salib) insinuate the power dynamic that is created between people, in particular between men, who take on particular roles during sexual intercourse. A common misnomer in many Middle Eastern societies, including Iraq, is that bottoms (salib) are the gay men who are trying to be like women. They are therefore considered to be outcasts. On the contrary, tops (mujab) are not even considered to be gay. Self-identified tops often talk proudly and publicly about their sexual practices, even with other men.

While the expression teo does not have a tangible meaning, it is used to give the impression that the person referred to is weak and insignificant.

Despite our best efforts, we were not able to identify terminology that is commonly used in Iraq to refer to lesbians or trans individuals.

INTRODUCTION



“We are simply human beings that deserve to be treated with the respect and dignity owed to all.”

In the decade following the 2003 U.S. invasion, Iraq witnessed its worst episodes of systematic violence against its lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. The sectarian political system institutionalized during this period greatly empowered certain religious leaders and politicians who subjected human rights to biased interpretations of religious law. Their rise to power, coupled with mass poverty and instability induced by years of economic sanctions, war, and the overthrow of a brutal, but largely secular, regime, continues to fuel recruitment for the armed groups that are largely responsible for the deadly waves of attacks against members of minority groups, including LGBT community members.

Pervasive negative stereotypes about homosexuality and a general lack of awareness regarding transgender issues in Iraq also contribute to the high levels of violence against LGBT people. Media outlets, religious leaders, and other figures and organizations that influence public opinion frequently accuse LGBT individuals of causing “the moral decay of society.” These entities and leaders equate homosexuality with crimes such as rape or robbery. The targeting of LGBT people as “perverts” and “criminals” legitimizes acts of violence against those believed to be LGBT.

During the rule of the Baath Party (1968-2003), there was little information or public debate within Iraqi society on LGBT issues. Iraqi lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender individuals were marginalized and invisible with no legal protection or social status. After the U.S.

invasion, many Iraqis gained access to the Internet and Western media for the first time, which allowed them to learn about how LGBT individuals are perceived and portrayed in other countries. However, because this heightened visibility of LGBT issues coincided with the U.S. invasion, many Iraqis began to equate homosexuality with increased exposure to the West, even claiming that LGBT people had never existed in Iraq prior to 2003.

Throughout Iraq over the past decade, many LGBT people have been the targets of violent, and sometimes deadly attacks by Islamist militias and vigilantes, as well as by members of their own families or tribes. Attackers target not only those whom they perceive to be LGBT, but also anyone they view as transgressors of traditional gender norms. The recent upsurge of turmoil and violence in Iraq at the time of this writing poses increased risks for the LGBT community.

The Iraqi LGBT Memoir Project tells the stories of five individuals who have bravely come forward to share their experiences and to demonstrate that, despite popular belief, there are LGBT persons in Iraq.

Some perpetrators commit hateful and violent acts against LGBT people in the name of protecting their tribal or family honor. Others are vigilantes who claim to be implementing Islamic laws. The popular perception of LGBT individuals as social outcasts, coupled with the extensive power of tribal leaders, clerics, and religious militias who endorse or

commit anti-LGBT violence, prevents LGBT individuals from seeking justice. Iraqi authorities generally do not investigate incidents of violence against LGBT people, and many attacks are never reported to the authorities at all. In some cases, police take advantage of vulnerable LGBT individuals to further exploit and intimidate them.

We're Here, Iraqi LGBT People's Accounts of Violence and Rights Abuse tells the stories of five individuals who have bravely come forward to share their experiences and to demonstrate that, despite popular belief, there are LGBT persons in Iraq. The authors of this publication seek to unveil the violence and discrimination that so many LGBT individuals face from their families, acquaintances, community members, and their government.

Contributors to this collection include three gay men, a lesbian woman and a transgender woman. The threats and circumstances that each of them struggle with vary according to a host of factors, including their socio-economic background, their gender, and the level of security in their local surroundings. Each personal story was written or told by the individuals themselves, and we have recounted the stories as they were told to us. Visual representations were selected or created by the authors to complement their accounts. After conducting follow-up interviews with each author, the editors added dates and information necessary for clarification.

This project strives to shed light on the daily struggles of Iraqi LGBT people, who are fighting to survive and overcome extreme violence. It also highlights the authors'

rights-based vision for their lives and their country. As one contributor has commented, "We are not a threat to our country. We don't want to undermine the fabric of Iraqi society or violate religious laws. We are simply human beings that deserve to be treated with the respect and dignity owed to all people."

These stories reveal how survivors of grave human rights violations find ways to adapt, resist, and begin to come together to knit the social fabric that is the precursor to community, political mobilization, and ultimately, social change.

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq, and MADRE are indebted to those who have courageously shared their stories, and grateful to our partners and allies who made this project possible. Given the ongoing security concerns in Iraq, we are not able to name all individuals and groups who generously supported this project. However, our gratitude runs deep for their dedication and commitment to the human rights of LGBT individuals in Iraq. We hope this publication will empower Iraq's LGBT community in its struggle for equality, dignity, and justice.



My name is Farrah. I was born in 1988, and I am a transgender woman from Baghdad, Iraq.

My difficult life started when I was one week old. Yes, one week. My dad and his family were abusing my mom, so she decided to take me at that age and, with the help of the neighbors, fled our home.

While she was trying to escape, my father's mother caught her, and she took me from my mother. She then kicked my mother out of the house. My mother returned to her family's house, and I stayed with my father's family with no official documents, aside from my birth certificate.

My dad divorced my mom and proceeded to marry another woman. The woman agreed to marry my father on the condition that I was not to be registered as her child. He agreed. So, I was left to live with just my grandmother, who is also originally from Baghdad. My grandfather had passed away a few years before I was born. Again, I was left without any documents.

I feel like a woman, but the problem is that my ID and my official documents don't reflect the true me. I'm not a man; I don't feel like a man. I'm a woman, with feminine desires, looks, and feelings. I barely go out because I can't risk people seeing me, judging me, and harassing me for the way I look.

My grandmother took care of me and my expenses. When it was time for me to enroll in school, she called my dad and told him that it was time for his kid to go to school. For that to happen, we needed to have the necessary documents. He denied her request, and so she started contacting our relatives to convince them to accept registering me as their child. My aunt agreed to do this, but

only if we paid her 500,000 Iraqi dinars (approximately \$430 by 2014 standards). My grandmother agreed and sold her gold to pay my aunt. I then received Iraqi citizenship, and I continued to live with my grandmother.

I enrolled in school. I spent my time there and wanted to hang out with the girls. I was enjoying becoming closer to them. One of the girls' mother used to pity me, so she would send me clothes and sandwiches.

My grandmother and I were very poor. My aunt had a very good financial status, and we would go to her house for each holiday. I suffered a lot of abuse from a relative in that household.

When I turned eighteen in 2006, I fell in love with my aunt's driver. I was attracted to men, because I was feminine and felt like a woman. This driver was my first love relationship. We were together for three and a half years and never left each other's sides. Sadly, in 2008, he was killed during a bombing in Baghdad.

My life became even sadder than before, especially when my grandmother – my only source of love, family feelings, and the only parental figure that I knew – became sick later that year. I dropped out of school when I was in the eighth grade to take care of her, because I wanted to repay her for all the things she had done for me. Unfortunately, she passed away a few months later.

After my grandmother's passing, I moved in with my aunt and her daughter. They treated me like a servant. They often insulted my mother, whom I had never met, and kept asking me to go find her. So, I moved again and went to live with my uncle from my dad's side and his son, who treated me like a brother. He died after falling from a building in 2009.

I couldn't stand living in that house anymore, so I went to live with one of my female cousins, who was working in a brothel. She pressured me to work with her as a sex worker, especially because I didn't have any source of income. She was very kind to me. I used to pay

her rent for one room and work with her. At the age of twenty, after six months of working, I met someone who was very sweet with me. He asked me to move in with him. However, on the day I moved in with him, his family followed us and began to hit me. They tried to shoot me, but he stopped them. They told him that either he must leave me, or they would kill me. So, in 2009, he left me in order to protect me.

I became very sad after that. I started smoking, and I continued living with my cousin, working with her, and going to nightclubs and brothels. Such houses are illegal in Iraq. The government tends to act like they don't exist, when in fact, they exist in all the Iraqi cities, except for the northern region where the law is more effective. The militias attack these houses every once in a while.

***...the atmosphere was very risky.
The army and local militias kept
coming into the house to insult us
and try to abuse us.***

Through my work, I met a pimp who treated me very well and was very kind to me. She asked me to move in with her, because my family members were not treating me well. She was my support system and a very good friend to me. However, the atmosphere was very risky. The army and local militias kept coming into the house to insult us and try to abuse us. I decided to go and live with my uncle (my father's brother), who agreed to take me in if I started working with him as a mechanic. I stayed there for a few months. During that time, he made comments about the way I behaved and tried to "turn me into a real man." Then, I moved again and this time went to live with another pimp, whom I'd met before, in Sulaymaniyah. I lived there for a few months, and that's when I received a call from my lover who had been forced to leave me. He said that we could be together again, and that he would take care of all of my expenses.

I went back to Baghdad. Now, I'm living with my partner. He's very sweet to me and treats me as his wife. I feel like a woman, but the problem is that my ID and my official documents don't reflect the true me. I'm not a man; I don't feel like a man. I'm a woman, with feminine desires, looks, and feelings. I barely go out because I can't risk people seeing me, judging me, and harassing me for the way I look. My only source of comfort and love is my lover and my cat. I wish that I can one day change my body and become a real woman. I want to look like "Lamees," a character played by the Turkish actress, Tuba Buyukustun. She is very beautiful.



My name is Leyla and I'm a lesbian from Basra, a very conservative city in the south of Iraq on the Arabic Gulf. I was born May 5, 1987.

Since I was three years old, I have felt different. I felt like I'm a man and I always wanted to play with boys. My first relationship was with a girl from my high school. I was 15 years old, and we were very close to each other. I was more like the man in the relationship. I was the one who protected and defended her when other girls were harassing her or bullying us. She was the first person that I loved in my life and the first person that I had sex with. We usually met in our houses pretending that we were studying, but in fact, we were spending time together. We rarely had sex, because we were afraid of our community and families, who consider people like us to be sinners.

After three years together, my family found out about the relationship, and I had to run from the house. I turned to a friend in Baghdad. It was 2005, and I was eighteen years old. I had to leave school when I was in the ninth grade. I was staying with this female friend who knew about my sexual orientation. My family kept looking for me. They went to my girlfriend's house and told her family that we were romantically involved. My girlfriend's family locked her in the house, and after the tribe found out about her, the men in the family slaughtered her. She was only 17 years old. I have not heard about any reaction from the police.

When I found out about that, I hated Basra with all my heart. I decided to disown my family and completely forget about them. I stayed in Baghdad with my friend, and we worked at the Sheraton Hotel. In the meantime, I had several hookups, because I found that our society does not provide a place for real relationships that last for a lifetime.



An example of an Iraqi nightclub similar to the one where Leyla worked.

In 2006, after the situation worsened in Basra because of the sectarian violence, my family had to flee, and they came to live in Baghdad. They were looking for me, and my mom wanted me to live with her. She accepted me for who I was. She accepted my orientation. She even started treating me as a man. So, I moved back in with my family.

I changed jobs and started working in a nightclub as a waiter. A nightclub in Iraq is basically men drinking alcohol, watching women dance to Iraqi music, and giving them money. I met a girl there who was coming to the nightclub regularly. We started having feelings towards one another and fell in love in late 2007. After a while of being together, the people I worked with found out about it. I started feeling that working there was a big risk for us, especially since my work starts at night and ends at dawn. Also, because Mahdi army members used to come to this club occasionally, they also knew about us. However, I had to keep working there, because I couldn't find another job.

One night when I was about to enter the club in 2008, the Mahdi army kidnapped me. They took me to a place that was



The Iraqi city of Basra.

covered with blood, and there were some gay men and two other lesbians. They started torturing us. They burned my left thigh and beat us without any mercy. Then, they slaughtered a gay man in front of our eyes.

After a week of being there, they released us, making us sign a paper stating that we would not have sex that is unapproved by Islam.

I left my job. I found a job in a coffee shop close to our neighborhood and remained in touch with my girlfriend. I need her love and our intimacy. We are truly in love until this very moment. We wish that one day we can live together freely without living in fear. We're trying now to find an opportunity to get out of the country and continue our lives together.

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My name is Mahmud and I was born in 1987 in Baghdad to a poor family. I'm a homosexual person who lives in a society that is not civilized.

My only dream is to have the freedom of choosing my sexual orientation, and be with a man who loves me and who I love truly - someone who owns my heart and I own his without harassment from the community and tribal values.

I want to be a simple free human being without the violence of my family and the other people whom I know and mingle with. I hope that one day, my dream comes true, and I marry a man who I live with and share the rest of my life.

I have had feminine feelings since childhood. I played like the girls, and even in school, my desire was to play games with them. When I was older and went to secondary school, I felt that I was different from other boys; my character was not the same as the other guys in

years old. We stayed together for two and a half years. Three months into this relationship, we had sex in his apartment. This was the first time I had ever had sex with anyone. He loved me and treated me like a loved person. He never let me need anything. He was helping and loving me as a brother and a friend. Unfortunately, he was someone that I only saw once every few weeks due to the many wives that he had and his position as a tribe leader.

In the meantime, I made a new friend, Amir Jabbar, who was living in our neighborhood. He was seventeen years old, gay, and became my closest friend. I met him through my boyfriend, Hayder. We spent all of our time together. Once in 2005, when we were going to a shop, we were threatened by the Mahdi army in Baghdad's Jadida market (which is in an old, poor neighborhood). They threatened us, telling us to be men and stop acting



Mahmud preparing to dye a customer's hair.



Hairstyle by Mahmud.



Makeup by Mahmud.

© Mahmud

my school. I thought, "I'm the only one like this. This only exists inside me." But after mixing with friends and getting to know people like me, like my nature, I started sharing my secrets and stories with them. My Christian friend Dani was an example of this. After talking about my feelings and myself, he supported me and expressed that he had the same feelings inside. He told me about himself and his relationships. I felt a great joy in finding someone like me and knowing that I was not the only guy who felt like a girl.

After a period of time, I got to know a young man in the area where I live, and he was my first love. I was sixteen

like women. I was very scared and felt very worried, because this army kills people, and also because I was afraid that my dad, with all his power, would find out about me. So, I moved into my sister's house in the Al-Mansour area, which is a very classy neighborhood located close to Baghdad International Airport.

Later that year, a man riding a motorcycle shot Amir in front of his dad's restaurant. I don't know why he was killed, but it's most likely because he was gay. Amir took three bullets - two in his stomach and one in his waist. After being hospitalized for three months, he passed away.

This was the start of all the bad things in my life. I lost my best friend. Then, my boyfriend left me because his friends started to suspect our relationship. I kept living with my sister until 2006, when my brothers forced me to join the Iraqi army. They claimed that this would be the solution for me to be a man, depend on myself, and keep me away from my friends who were acting as a bad influence on me. The army in Iraq is not a mandatory thing, but my family made me join when I was nineteen years old. As a preparatory step before joining the army, I first began working at the Muthana. Muthana airport was mainly used for military purposes in Baghdad, but it has now closed. After only a few months, I received a threat from someone telling me that if I didn't quit my job, I would be killed, solely because they didn't like the way that I looked and behaved. So, I left my job, and I went back to live with my sister. My parents never took me back, because I attracted danger to them. This was true. We kept receiving threats that would force us to move to another neighborhood. All of my family members blamed me. The only support system that I had was my mother, who had a heart attack. She became disabled because of what I was going through and because of my problems with my brothers. My brothers kept calling me a "shameless faggot" and kept blaming me for the family having to move to a new neighborhood.

In 2007, when I was twenty years old, I started working as a hairstylist and makeup artist in a women's salon with one of my friends. I loved my job, but my family didn't like what I was doing. Because of tradition and their ideas about how a man should act, they forced me to quit.

In 2009, I lost my mother, and my situation became worse. My brothers always beat me, and I still have some bruises until this very moment. I couldn't take all that anymore, so I traveled to Basra and stayed with a friend. That's when I met someone new, someone I never thought I would love. But his care and love for me made me love him, and we began a relationship. He was thirty-two years old, and I was twenty-two years old. He gave me hope again, and I felt that I was not alone anymore. We decided that we would travel and pursue a new life in a different country. We arranged everything and headed towards Turkey. But because we didn't have enough money on us, they didn't let us cross the borders. Iraqis back then needed to carry \$2000 in order to prove financial means

to Turkish authorities for a single entry, thirty day visa at the border or at the airport. We didn't have the funds, so we went back to Iraq. My boyfriend went to Basra. I went to stay with a friend in Baghdad, because my boyfriend couldn't take care of me, as he had spent all his money on the trip to Turkey.

In 2011, when I was twenty-four years old, I was going to visit a friend in Karada neighborhood. Three guys grabbed me, raped me behind a gas station, burned me with cigarettes, and stole the memory stick that I had with me. That memory stick contained pictures of me wearing women's clothing and makeup. They published these pictures. When my family saw these pictures, they started pursuing me with the intent to kill me.

I turned to a friend who had a beauty salon. I started working and sleeping there for a few months. Then I moved in with another friend of mine. I couldn't go out anymore, especially because of the emo killing campaigns¹ and the published list that provided the names of guys, including my own, who were wanted as dead.

I moved from one house to another, until I found out about an organization that provides protection and shelter for gay people. I moved into this shelter a few months ago, in November of 2013. I can't work, as I only studied until the twelfth grade. I'm also suffering from a sexually transmitted infection in my anus, and I can't have sex comfortably. I'm very worried that this could get worse.

I have no problem with the way I am. God created me like that. I have no control over who I am. I just want to live freely.



¹ In February of 2012, vigilante groups issued a wave of threats against Iraqi youth seen as belonging to the non-conformist "emo" subculture, a category in which vigilantes included many LGBT and gender-nonconforming youth. The warnings were followed by reports of abduction and murder of a number of youth who were targeted because of their appearance. Iraqi government officials, who had amplified risks for youth by vilifying "emo" subculture, allowed the wave of attacks and killings to continue with impunity. You can read more about this incident on IGLHRC's website: <http://iglhrc.org/content/iraq-investigate-%E98%80%2emo%E-99%80%2attacks>

Ali

My name is Ali, and I'm a gay person from Iraq. I was born in 1990. I am a person that loves freedom, a simple guy who wishes to have a good future, and marry a man that loves me, and that I love. These are my hopes.

I discovered that I was gay when I was living in Jordan, where I liked a guy that went to my school. We had something developing, and I felt like a girl that is getting closer to a guy. My heart was beating so fast. We were together for a year and a half.

During that time, my family decided to return to Iraq, which we did. And that's when my tragic story started - a tragedy in a country where no kind of freedom is available or allowed.

I dropped out of school when I was fourteen or fifteen years old because of the situation that I was living in.

After we returned to Iraq, my father was very violent with me. He used to hit me for the smallest of reasons and call me a "Godless faggot." Whenever I talked back and tried to stand up for myself, he would hit me even harder! I still have marks on my head, foot, and left thigh.

I made an arrangement with some of my relatives to live at my grandparents' house. After a while, even my grandparents started treating me differently. So, I started spending most of my time at a friend's house to avoid my grandparents and their cruel comments, or I went to stay with my aunt.

© An image of the external appearance of the Iraqi National Theatre in the Karada district in Baghdad by Rasoul Ali (who is unrelated to the Ali of this story) - dreameral2010@yahoo.com



Staying with my aunt opened up a different door for me. I started working in theater. I participated in four plays that were shown at the Iraqi National Theatre in Baghdad.

Ali, who cannot share his photo, took a picture of his shadow to represent himself in this story.



© Ali

Then, I was offered a part on a TV show playing the role of a homosexual. The show aired on *Sharqiya TV*, one of the most popular local Iraqi channels, mostly famous for showing TV series.

After the show aired on TV, I faced a number of dangerous incidents. When I was going home one day, a car stopped in front of me in a jihad-associated neighborhood, mostly controlled by the Shia Mahdi army, located in western Baghdad. Two of the passengers got out of the car and beat me until I passed out. When I woke up, I found myself in a car with four guys who drove me to a house in the same neighborhood where my grandparents were living. They raped me. Then another person, a neighbor of my grandparents named Alaa

Muzher, came, raped me as well, and started hitting me. He was a member of the Mahdi army. After that, two of them grabbed me and another one put a wick/bandage (fteela) in my anus. They called one of their friends to videotape me with his cellphone. Finally, they put glue in my anus and threw me in front of my grandparents' house.

When I went inside, I found my grandmother waiting for me. She didn't want to sleep before I got back, and she was shocked when she saw the blood dripping from my head and mouth. I told her that they had put glue

**My name is Saad. I was born in 1989 in Baghdad.
I don't have big dreams. I want to be healthy, love someone,
and live in a place where I am free and respected.**

My family, which consisted of my parents, two brothers, three sisters, and me, lived in a nice big house with my uncles and aunts. My family started doubting my sexual orientation and questioned my gay-like behavior, but they didn't do anything, because they saw me as the youngest, spoiled member of the family.

I only have some basic education. I went to school for just a few years, up until the fourth grade. Now, I can't remember how to read or write.

When I was twelve years old, my dad passed away, and my mom had to become my father and my mother.

After that, a new person moved into our neighborhood, and I discovered that he was homosexual. We became friends; he understood me. I was very relieved and happy that I had a friend who could understand me. We were romantically involved.

In 2002, my uncle had some political problems with a government official, and we had to move out. We all split up and moved to different places. My family moved to Haifa Street, which is a two-mile long street in Baghdad, mostly known for its apartment compounds in which rich people typically live. However, we lived in a house that had no services, no electricity, and no water.

Life became harder, and I had to work to help my family. I worked in a carpentry shop, but my brother used to steal the little money I made from working there.

One day, the shop owner tried to abuse me, but I managed to escape. I didn't tell anyone about this, but I never went back to work there again.

In 2004, when I was fifteen years old, I started working at Camp Ferrin-Huggins, a war camp established by the American army, who fought the Mahdi army from there. I worked for the housing services section. That's where I met my first love. That's where I really felt something towards

someone - the first time in which I felt free. It was a mix of weird, but good, feelings.

After working there for a number of months, I had to quit my job because of the bad security situation in Baghdad and the threats by the militias. They threatened and killed many people.

My family and I had to leave the country because of this situation, but we could only afford to leave and live in Syria for three months. Because we didn't have enough funds, we had to return to Iraq.

*Hayfa Street:
One of the
neighborhoods
where Saad
used to live.*



© eHaifa street, Baghdad by zzztriple2000

In 2005, my mother was killed in one of the fights between the Americans and Al-Qaeda. That's when my real tragedy started. This is when the real sorrow and difficult life began.

We had to move out to the compounds that were built by camp Ferrin Huggins, where I used to work before. I now had to support myself and thus got my old job back.

My brother kept taking my money saying he was going to save the money for me. In fact, he was spending it to support his wife.

After a while, my contract ended, and I stayed at home with my siblings. I listened to their insults without being able to answer them. I was afraid that I would be kicked out of the house. The only good relationship that I had was with one of my sisters-in-law, who knew about me and was comforting me.



© Saad

The camp where Saad used to work.

One day, another sister-in-law hit me for no reason. When I told my brother, he started beating me as well and threw all of my clothes into the street.

I left the house and headed towards Kerbala, where I slept in the streets for two months. Then, I went back to Baghdad and stayed with my sister. But it didn't take long for my brother-in-law to start hitting me and kick me out of the house. He didn't want me in the house because my older brother asked him not to keep me there. He also said that he didn't want his son to turn gay like me.

My sister asked one of my brothers to keep me at his house, and he did. I started making friends in the neighborhood. I worked for a few months at the Elaf Islamic Bank. One of the guys that I befriended was Dani, who became very close to me. He taught me how to think and behave. We kept each other's secrets. He introduced me to a lot of other gay people. I was surprised, as this was my first time in such an environment. I even got involved in a relationship with a guy from the neighborhood. We had a beautiful thing going.

All this didn't last long, though. My brother kicked me out. My aunts didn't take me in. My boyfriend left me. I was alone.

I was forced to work as a sex-worker. I was forced to sell my body. I started meeting guys in cafes, ones like Usud Al-Rafidaen, a now-closed café that was located in the Karada neighborhood. That café was a place for gay people to meet, and that's where I met the storeowner. He is a gay man who approached me and offered to provide everything for me if I stopped being a sex-worker. So, I did. He became my world, and

Love is what Saad is looking for...

we were romantically and sexually involved until he died in a bombing five months later.

I moved back in with my brother, and after some time of being alone and sad, I met someone from the neighborhood. I was very attracted to him. He came one day to visit me at home. We went to my room and started kissing each other. My brother walked in on us and saw us acting like a married couple. He kicked the guy out of the house and locked me in the house for two months - two months filled with abuse, beatings, and insults. Afterwards, I started receiving threats from local militias and Al-Qaeda, and I was once accidentally shot at by them in 2012. That same day, I decided to run. At midnight, I went to my friend's house in Karada, a neighborhood located on the east side of Baghdad.

I started working in a restaurant and went from living with one friend to another. One time, my friend Ahmed and I were sexually abused at one of the checkpoints that separate the neighborhoods in Baghdad. The following day, Ahmed's brother called and said that the police were in our apartment looking for us.

I moved again, and this time, I lived with a group of gay people. Here, I was raped many times. This is where I got a sexually transmitted disease in my anus. But I never cared. I had to keep a roof over my head. I stayed there for four months. I had a surgery for my anus, and after three weeks of recovery, I received a call from Ahmed telling me about this organization that helps gay people. There, I was treated with respect, mercy, and humanity. I've been at the organization for fifteen months now, and despite the very bad emotional state that I'm in now, I keep going. Now, I'm getting support from people who treat me like a person.



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The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), founded in 2003, is a truly pioneering national women's organization dedicated to rebuilding Iraq on the basis of secular democracy and human rights for all. OWFI has developed innovative anti-violence and political empowerment strategies for women across Iraq. OWFI advocates on behalf of women who are most marginalized, including those who are incarcerated, widowed, displaced or battered.

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THE INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (IGLHRC)

founded in 1990, is a leading international human rights organization dedicated to improving the lives of people who experience discrimination or abuse on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. We are dedicated to strengthening the capacity of the LGBT human rights movement worldwide to effectively conduct documentation of LGBT human rights violations and by engaging in human rights advocacy with partners around the globe. We work with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies and civil society partners.

IGLHRC holds consultative status at the United Nations as a recognized non-governmental organization representing the concerns and human rights of LGBT people worldwide. Headquartered in New York, IGLHRC has staff and offices in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

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MADRE Mission

To advance women's human rights by meeting urgent needs in communities and building lasting solutions to the crises women face.

MADRE Vision

MADRE works towards a world in which all people enjoy the fullest range of individual and collective human rights; in which resources are shared equitably and sustainably; in which women participate effectively in all aspects of society; and in which people have a meaningful say in policies that affect their lives.

MADRE's vision is enacted with an understanding of the inter-relationships between the various issues we address and by a commitment to working in partnership with women at the local, regional and international levels who share our goals.

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November 2014
