

LGBTQ IN TURKMENISTAN: A NEVER-ENDING TRAP

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Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive states in the post-Soviet region in its treatment of sexual orientation and gender identity. Same-sex relations between men are criminalized under Article 135 of the Turkmen Criminal Code, which prescribes imprisonment for “sodomy,” while Article 133, which concerns “indecent behavior,” is applied broadly to sexual minorities and carries penalties ranging from two to twenty years of imprisonment.¹ This provision is routinely applied not only to prosecute individuals but also to maintain a climate of fear and complete invisibility for LGBTQ people. Criminalization facilitates police surveillance, secret monitoring of private communications, and coercive interrogation practices in which individuals suspected of same-sex relationships experience pressure, intimidation, and threats of arrest. The state has made no effort to revise this law, and official rhetoric continues to portray homosexuality as a pathology or a danger to national values. As early as 2007, the issue of decriminalizing homosexual relations was raised during a visit to Turkmenistan by members of the German Bundestag. During their discussions, the Turkmen Minister of Foreign Affairs categorically rejected any possibility of decriminalization and asserted that homosexuality was incompatible with Turkmen cultural norms.² Same sex relations continue to be punishable under domestic law.

There are no official government statistics concerning LGBTQ persons, and no independent research institutions undertake systematic study of socially sensitive subjects such as sexual orientation or gender identity. As a result, there is no national data collection, and it is not possible to obtain reliable information from state agencies. Same sex and gender diverse relationships remain profoundly taboo, which prevents any discussion of these topics in the

¹ LGBTQ people are being targeted in Turkmenistan after Azattyk released a film about the persecution of gays in the country. Radio Azattyk, Azzatyk. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/33062350.html>

² Düstere Zeiten für Homosexuelle in Turkmenistan. LSVD, April 5, 2007. <http://www.lsvd.de/presse/pressespiegel/pressespiegel/article/duistere-zeiten-fuer-homosexuelle-in-turkmenistan-4770.html>

domestic press and excludes them from the curricula of secondary schools and institutions of higher education.³

However, it is known that abusive practices by law enforcement are widespread. Police units, including officers from the Ministry of National Security, detain individuals suspected of same-sex conduct and subject them to degrading treatment that may involve extortion, beatings, forced confessions,⁴ and invasive medical examinations intended to “prove” homosexual activity. Human rights reports indicate that detainees are frequently denied access to legal counsel, held without communication, and pressured to reveal names of acquaintances or partners, which broadens the group of individuals placed at risk. These methods create an atmosphere in which LGBTQ persons live under a constant threat of arbitrary detention and abuse with no realistic possibility of protection or redress.

In addition to formal repression, LGBTQ individuals in Turkmenistan face severe social ostracism rooted in conservative norms, traditional values, and state-sponsored homophobia. Public discussion of LGBTQ issues is censored, independent civil society organizations do not exist in meaningful form, and media portrayals consistently present non-heteronormative identities as immoral or foreign. Families often react to suspected homosexuality with rejection, coercion, or violence, and victims are unable to seek assistance from authorities without exposing themselves to further harm. In these circumstances, LGBTQ individuals must conceal their identity, manage daily life under extreme psychological stress, and confront systemic discrimination that affects employment, education, healthcare, and personal safety.

Lesbians in Turkmenistan live in an environment that is profoundly hostile to any expression of non-heteronormative identity, an environment shaped by the criminalization of same-sex relations between men, by deeply rooted social conservatism, and by a broader state policy that suppresses open discussion of sexual orientation. Although the criminal code formally targets men, women perceived as lesbian encounter severe forms of discrimination, coercion, and violence within the family and the wider community. Human rights reports describe instances in which women suspected of same-sex relationships are subjected to forced

³ Life for LGBTQ people in Turkmenistan, the most closed country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. TGEU, March 20, 2024. <https://tgeu.org/ru/the-lives-of-LGBTQ-people-in-turkmenistan-the-most-closed-off-country-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/>

⁴ LGBTQ people are being targeted in Turkmenistan after Azattyk released a film about the persecution of gays in the country. Radio Azzatyk. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/33062350.html>

marriage, coercive efforts by relatives intended to impose heterosexual norms, physical abuse, and psychological pressure aimed at enforcing conformity with prescribed gender roles.

The state offers no meaningful protection to women in this position, since law enforcement agencies consistently dismiss complaints relating to sexual orientation and often react with harassment or threats toward the complainant. In the absence of legal safeguards, civil society structures, or space for public dialogue, lesbians in Turkmenistan have no reliable means to seek assistance or to challenge abuses. They are compelled to conceal their identity in all aspects of daily life and to live with the constant fear of exposure, a situation that results in sustained mistreatment and leaves them with no realistic avenue for safety or redress.

Historically, homosexuality was treated as a criminal offence under the legal framework of the Russian Empire, whose jurisdiction extended to the territory of present day Turkmenistan beginning in the nineteenth century. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the new Soviet authorities formally decriminalized homosexual conduct, although they simultaneously characterized it as a pathological condition. It is important to note that the removal of criminal sanctions did not occur uniformly across the Soviet Union. In the predominantly Islamic republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as in predominantly Christian Georgia, homosexuality remained a criminalized act despite broader reforms undertaken in other Soviet regions.

In 1934 the Stalinist government reinstated a policy that treated homosexuality as a criminal offence throughout the entire Soviet state. This shift was codified through the adoption of Article 121, which prescribed imprisonment for periods of up to five years for consensual same-sex relations between men. The reintroduction of criminal liability reinforced deep social stigma, and individuals identified or suspected as homosexual faced hostility from state authorities and the general population. As a consequence, homosexual individuals concealed their identity to an extreme degree in order to avoid exposure and punishment.

The second edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia articulated the state's position by defining homosexuality in the following manner: The origin of H[omosexuality] is linked to everyday social conditions; for the overwhelming majority of people indulging in H[omosexuality], these perversions stop as soon as the person finds himself in a favorable social environment.... In Soviet society with its healthy mores, H[omosexuality] as a sexual perversion is considered shameful and criminal. Soviet criminal legislation regards

H[omosexuality] as punishable with the exception of those instances where H[omosexuality] is a manifestation of marked psychic disorder (Gomoseksualizm, 1952, p. 35).

The three decades that followed did not alter prevailing attitudes toward homosexuals in the Soviet Union. The *Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary*, published in 1984, reiterated earlier ideological assertions by defining homosexuality as a form of sexual deviation and as an attraction to individuals of the same gender. Both gay men and lesbians were subjected to the full spectrum of homophobic prejudice. As noted by Dr. Igor Kon, a leading Russian sociologist, public attitudes toward lesbians were as unyielding as those directed at gay men. Lesbians faced ridicule, persecution, expulsion from universities, termination of employment, and threats involving the removal of their children, which underscores the breadth of the discrimination directed toward women perceived as non-heteronormative.

Large numbers of homosexual individuals were imprisoned under the Soviet regime, and their treatment in labor camps and prisons was exceptionally severe. They occupied the lowest position in the inmate hierarchy and were subjected to harassment and abuse by both prison staff and fellow detainees. Those who succeeded in concealing their sexual orientation lived with continual anxiety, fearing exposure and subsequent punishment. The broader social environment offered no recognition or protection, which resulted in a pervasive climate of silence and repression.

In contemporary Turkmenistan, homosexuality remains a subject of profound taboo within a society that is more than ninety percent Muslim and that adheres strongly to conservative cultural norms. Male homosexuality continues to be criminalized and is punishable by up to two years of imprisonment. Individuals who are gay must choose between concealing their identity or confronting the possibility of criminal prosecution and lifelong social stigma. Turkmenistan has maintained the Soviet era provision that criminalizes same-sex relations, and along with Uzbekistan remains one of only two former Soviet republics that continue to treat homosexuality as a criminal offence. In 2017, Shemshat Atadzhanova, who headed the Department for Democracy and Human Rights of the Turkmen National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights under the President of Turkmenistan, affirmed this position by stating that the abolition of criminal penalties for homosexuality would contradict Turkmen culture and the

mentality of the Turkmen people, which she described as being rooted in traditional family values, and she therefore concluded that such legal reforms were unacceptable.⁵

Multiple reports describe LGBTQ members in Turkmenistan being subjected to physical and verbal abuse by police officers and by members of the public. Testimonies collected by human rights organizations illustrate a pattern of entrapment, arbitrary detention, and coercive violence. One victim recounted that he had arranged a meeting for seven o'clock in the evening and, upon arriving at the designated location, found that the individual he expected to meet was absent. After calling to confirm the meeting, he was approached by two plainclothes police officers who placed him in handcuffs and transported him to a police station. According to his account, the officers beat him and subjected him to verbal abuse during the drive, and the assault continued once they reached the station. He further reported that the officers administered electric shocks, demonstrating the severity of the mistreatment inflicted upon men perceived to be gay in Turkmenistan.⁶

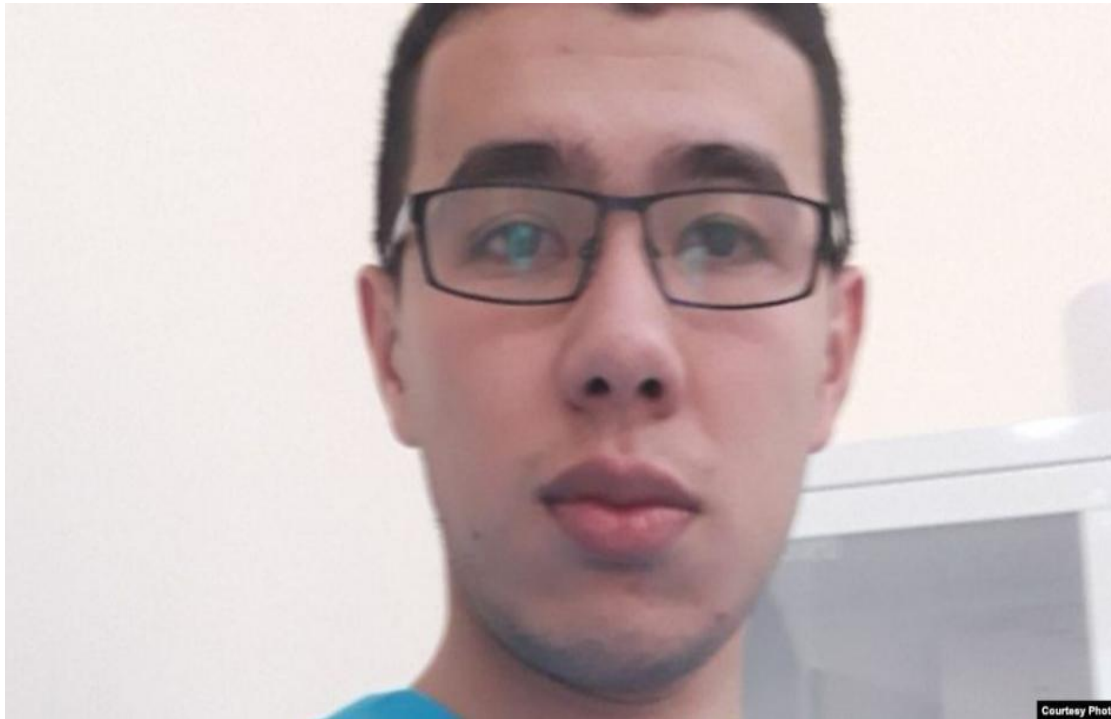
In November 2019, the case of Kasymberdy Garayev, a gay man who disappeared after coming to the attention of police in Turkmenistan, drew significant international concern. Rachel Denber, deputy director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch, stated that the organization was deeply troubled by indications that Garayev was being held incommunicado following his disclosure of his sexual orientation. She emphasized that Turkmenistan's longstanding record of serious human rights violations, including frequent enforced disappearances, created substantial grounds for fearing for his safety and well-being.

On October 21, 2019, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty published a personal account in which Garayev openly described his sexual orientation, although the outlet initially withheld his name for security reasons. According to information subsequently shared with Human Rights Watch, Turkmen authorities began to search for Garayev shortly after the narrative appeared. On October 24, Garayev informed the outlet that police had summoned him for what he described as a background check. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty reported that they lost contact with

⁵ Rustam Muhamedov. LGBTQ Persons in Turkmenistan: The Invisible, the Discriminated Against, and the Stigmatized. Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, July 25, 2022. <https://www.illiberalism.org/LGBTQ-persons-in-turkmenistan-the-invisible-the-discriminated-against-and-the-stigmatized/>

⁶ Farangis Najibullah. LGBTQ In Turkmenistan: Go To Jail Or Live A Lie. RadioFreeEurope. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, October 22, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/LGBTQ-in-turkmenistan-go-to-jail-or-live-a-lie/30230788.html>

him approximately thirty minutes before he was scheduled to appear at the police station, and they have not been able to determine whether he attended the meeting or whether any further information about his fate has since emerged.



Kasymberdy Garayev© 2019 Photo Courtesy of RFE/RL

Turkmen police had previously detained Garayev in 2018 after authorities employed intermediaries to lure him into an online meeting with another man. In his account to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, he stated that officers used a stun gun during the arrest and demanded that he confess his sexual orientation on camera. He was released without formal charges after several hours. On October 31, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty published a video that Garayev had requested be made public if he were to disappear or otherwise come to harm. In this recording, he apologized to his family and identified himself by name.

According to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, Garayev chose to recount his experiences in order to challenge the extremely hostile environment that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals face in Turkmenistan and to respond to the persistent bullying he endured within his family. By publicly acknowledging his sexual orientation, he hoped to initiate broader societal reflection and to encourage changes in public attitudes toward sexual minorities. Adult consensual same-sex conduct remains a criminal offense under Turkmen law and is

punishable by a prison sentence of up to two years. Reports from previous years indicate that police have subjected individuals accused of same-sex relations to forced anal examinations, procedures that lack evidentiary legitimacy and constitute cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, which in some cases may amount to torture.

Turkmenistan maintains an exceptionally repressive political system in which cooperation with foreign media frequently results in persecution. More than one hundred twenty individuals have been forcibly disappeared either after arrest or following judicial proceedings, and their families have received no official information regarding their fate or current circumstances. In such an environment, the disappearance of a person who has been summoned by the police raises a substantial concern that the individual may have been subjected to enforced disappearance.⁷

Homosexuals, including lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals, are subject to profound stigma in Turkmenistan, a situation that renders them largely invisible within society and creates an analytical vacuum that significantly complicates any effort to assess the contemporary state of LGBTQ rights. The near absence of publicly available information on sexual minorities should not be construed as a favorable indicator. Rather, it reflects the extreme caution exercised by members of this community, who are widely understood to constitute an especially vulnerable population. The complete lack of LGBTQ organizations or non-governmental entities advocating for the rights of sexual minorities underscores the extent to which public expression of LGBTQ identity is suppressed.

There is no official data concerning LGBTQ individuals in Turkmenistan, and no independent research institution engages in systematic study of issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Topics perceived as socially sensitive, including LGBTQ identities, remain outside the scope of public inquiry. The state provides no access to relevant statistics or documentation, which further reinforces the invisibility of sexual minorities. Public discussion of same-sex or gender-diverse relationships is virtually nonexistent, as these subjects remain deeply taboo and are effectively excluded from the sphere of public discourse.⁸

⁷ Turkmenistan: Gay Man Missing After Coming Out Online. Human Rights Watch, November 1, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/01/turkmenistan-gay-man-missing-after-coming-out-online>

⁸ The lives of LGBTQ people in Turkmenistan, the most closed-off country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. TGEU, March 20, 2024. <https://tgeu.org/the-lives-of-LGBTQ-people-in-turkmenistan-the-most-closed-off-country-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/>

The discriminatory norms and practices that prevail in Turkmenistan, together with the enforcement of anti-gay legislation, the use of torture and ill treatment, and the absence of information resources and essential services such as HIV testing and treatment, generate severe psychological pressures and health risks for LGBTQ individuals. These individuals confront such challenges without institutional support and must also contend with the internalization of homo, bi, and transphobic attitudes that arise from prolonged exposure to social hostility. This oppressive environment compels non-heterosexual persons to lead clandestine lives characterized by the suppression of identity and desire, or, in circumstances that permit it, to leave the country in search of refuge in societies that offer greater protection. While most documented cases concern discriminatory practices against homosexual men, this should not be interpreted as evidence that lesbian or bisexual women experience more favorable conditions. Within a patriarchal social structure that restricts women's autonomy through practices such as early and arranged marriage, the lack of documented cases more likely reflects the reduced visibility of women's experiences and the heightened constraints under which they live.

Violence directed at non-heterosexual individuals is widespread within law enforcement institutions, where LGBTQ persons are subjected to torture, ill treatment, and other forms of inhuman conduct. Within the existing social and political landscape, prospects for substantive reform remain exceedingly limited. The evidence reviewed above demonstrates the absence of any governmental commitment to address systemic discrimination or to reduce the stigmatization of LGBTQ persons and other vulnerable groups, including through the decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations. No domestic organizations possess the capacity to challenge entrenched practices, and initiatives by external actors aimed at fostering a more inclusive environment face significant restrictions.⁹

In Turkmenistan, consensual same-sex relations between men remain criminalized under Article 135 of the Penal Code, which imposes a prison sentence of up to two years, a provision that continues to be enforced through 2025.¹⁰ Reports indicate that authorities employ entrapment methods, including the creation of so-called trap apartments, to identify and arrest

⁹ Rustam Muhamedov. LGBTQ Persons in Turkmenistan: The Invisible, the Discriminated Against, and the Stigmatized. Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, July 25, 2022. <https://www.illiberalism.org/LGBTQ-persons-in-turkmenistan-the-invisible-the-discriminated-against-and-the-stigmatized/>

¹⁰ Turkmenistan: Events of 2024. Human Rights Watch, 2025. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/turkmenistan?utm_source=chatgpt.com

men suspected of engaging in same-sex activity. Individuals detained under this provision frequently face forced anal examinations, physical violence, extortion, and arbitrary detention. Since 2023, LGBTQ persons have continued to experience intrusive surveillance and harassment in a context where internet access is tightly controlled and civil society institutions are virtually absent. The state's comprehensive regulation of media and its prohibition of independent activism leave LGBTQ individuals without meaningful avenues for support, advocacy, or representation.

Lesbians, transgender persons, and others whose identities do not conform to prevailing gender norms encounter similarly systemic patterns of discrimination and mistreatment.¹¹ Individuals identifying as LGBTQ continue to face pervasive hostility, violence, and degrading treatment, and perpetrators are rarely subjected to accountability measures. The government has consistently refused to adopt legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Following the international release of a documentary on July 3, 2024 that documented abuses against LGBTQ individuals in Turkmenistan, additional reports surfaced indicating that police conducted targeted raids directed at persons suspected of belonging to the LGBTQ community, as well as individuals believed to have connections with activists abroad.¹²

These individuals experience arbitrary constraints on their freedom of movement, expression, and association, as well as forced labor, denial of official documentation, and restricted access to essential public services. This intersectional discrimination produces cumulative disadvantages that are especially evident in efforts to obtain adequate healthcare, secure legal recognition, and preserve personal autonomy. Between 2023 and 2025, the continued absence of legal safeguards together with the state's repressive posture has compelled many LGBTQ persons to conceal their identity, seek refuge abroad, or endure significant psychological distress. As a result, they remain acutely vulnerable within an environment that provides no meaningful protection or avenues for redress.¹³

In conclusion, there is likewise no authoritative national data on discrimination against LGBTQ individuals, apart from occasional information provided by isolated sources. It can be

¹¹ Turkmenistan. Freedom House, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/nations-transit/2024?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹² Turkmenistan 2024. Amnesty International, 2025. https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/report-turkmenistan/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹³ Turkmenistan: Events of 2023. Human Rights Watch, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/turkmenistan?utm_source=chatgpt.com

inferred that the likelihood of LGBTQ persons submitting complaints to the office of the ombudsman is extremely low, given existing legislation and prevailing social conditions. The requirement that complainants provide their name, place of residence, and signature creates a fundamental barrier for individuals who fear disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity and potential persecution by state authorities. This requirement effectively prevents sexual minorities from seeking assistance or redress through this institutional mechanism.¹⁴

Meanwhile, sexual minorities in Turkmenistan constitute a profoundly marginalized and largely invisible segment of the population, living under a persistent threat of mistreatment and hostility originating from state authorities and from elements within society that endorse nationalist or conservative viewpoints. Because same-sex relations remain criminalized and public attitudes are overwhelmingly intolerant, LGBTQ individuals routinely refrain from reporting violence, discrimination, or other forms of abuse. Many fear that any disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity, even in contexts where they are seeking assistance, could result in arrest, public humiliation, blackmail, or further harm. This pervasive climate of fear is intensified by the absence of legal protections and the prevalence of societal animosity, both of which are reinforced by conservative cultural expectations and by the expanding influence of religious norms. Within a country where traditional values and extensive governmental control shape daily life, LGBTQ persons are compelled to live in secrecy and social isolation. Their experiences of suffering frequently remain unacknowledged, and their fundamental rights are consistently denied in an environment that offers no meaningful channels for justice or protection.

The consequences of this situation reach far beyond the experiences of individual LGBTQ persons and illuminate the broader structural conditions that impede social development in Turkmenistan. The government's unwillingness to acknowledge or address the needs of sexual minorities exemplifies a political environment that restricts civic engagement, suppresses alternative viewpoints, and obstructs the formation of inclusive social institutions. The lack of independent civil society organizations and the absence of public discussion on matters related to sexual orientation or gender identity reinforce entrenched patterns of discrimination and hinder

¹⁴ Life for LGBTQ people in Turkmenistan, the most closed country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. TGEU, March 20, 2024. <https://tgeu.org/ru/the-lives-of-LGBTQ-people-in-turkmenistan-the-most-closed-off-country-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/>

the creation of support systems that could alleviate the hardships faced by LGBTQ individuals. In the absence of meaningful legal reforms and greater openness in public life, the systemic obstacles confronting sexual minorities will continue, leaving them with severely limited opportunities to live with dignity and security.

November 24, 2025