



Witness Statement of Ako*

Name: Ako
Place of Birth: Mahabad, Iran
Date of Birth: 1992
Occupation: Student

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: July 13, 2013

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Ako. It was approved by Ako on March 30, 2014. There are 36 paragraphs in the statement.

The views and opinions of the witness expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the witness.

Introduction

1. My name is Ako. I am gay. I am from Mahabad, a Kurdish town in East Azarbaijan Province. I left Iran at age nineteen. I am twenty now. It's been about nine months since I left Iran. I was born in 1992. I was a student before I left.

Childhood and Adolescence

2. I remember my family finding out about my identity when I was seven. When I went to school I would get attached to most of my friends. I wouldn't play in the streets. When I went to school with a friend to whom I was attached, I would not let him go and I cried when he went home, saying, "Why should he go home? He should come to our place."
3. During my childhood my family found out I was in some way different from others. But my grandfather would tell the family, "He's a kid, and [he behaves in this way] because he has two sisters. He'll change when he grows up." But when I grew up my behavior didn't change. Until the fifth grade, I would still get attached to my friends, and it was hard for me to part with them. I was in the eighth grade when I found out about my true identity. Through the internet I realized that I was not the only person attracted exclusively to men, and that there is a group of people, called "gay," who are like this – genetically or otherwise. I saw a medical geneticist in Mahabad. I took a hormone test and found out I was gay, and I learned that it was not my fault. It's something I was born with.

Problems at School and in the Home

4. When I started middle school I didn't have facial hair and my voice wasn't manly, which made other students make fun of me. Some of the students and even two of the teachers and our vice-principal proposed to have relations with me several times. I was studying at the Allameh Majlesi school. The kids would make fun of me. I think this happens quite frequently to a gay person. In high school, they called me "the lady," "mommy's boy," and "sissy." My behavior wasn't abnormal. I was just being myself, but it was abnormal to them. I wasn't manly.
5. My father fought with me over this several times. He would say, "Why are you holding your spoon this way? It looks very effeminate. Why are you holding the cup this way?" These were the sorts of problems I grew up with.
6. My rank in the university entrance examination was quite high, and I could have studied surgical technology at the Urmia Medical School, but I did not attend because I'm afraid of the sight of blood. I feared seeing people who got into accidents. I lost this opportunity because of my fear.
7. My family would say, "What are you afraid of, it's human blood. We're Kurdish. We were always in the mountains. What's the problem? Why are you like women? Why should you be afraid of blood?" I lost this opportunity and had to take the university entrance exam one more time. My father was quite outraged the first time and didn't allow me to go to any other city. He said, "You have to study at Mahabad."
8. I studied Chemical Engineering at the Payam Noor University. At the university, most of the people I knew were from Mahabad. They would talk the same way they did while I was growing up. Being older, I had a little more mustache and beard, but they would still call me "Ms. Pretty" and things like

that. But since I was at the university for only two terms, I wasn't really part of the university environment.

9. Sometimes the things you hear are worse than being beaten. For instance when I would say something my father and uncle would say, "Women should keep quiet. We don't talk to women." Until recently, my father would say, "I'll definitely find you a woman." When I asked why, he would say, "When I was sixteen or seventeen I used to act just like you. When I was eighteen my father got me a wife and I changed. I now want to get you a wife." They wouldn't consider you a "man" in conversations. Particularly when a number of men had gathered, or when we had a guest over, they wouldn't let me participate in the conversation. My father would say, "I won't consider you a man as long as you don't change the way you talk, the way you move your hands, the way you hold the cup, and the way you drink your tea."
10. He would tell me beforehand, "I know one of the guests, and it's better if you don't talk in front of them." When I asked why, he would say, "This is one of the conditions I set for you. I won't let you participate in the manly discussions unless you change your behaviors, take off your bracelets, take off your ring, stop cutting your hair the way you do, and stop putting gel on your hair."
11. He wouldn't let me take care of my own affairs, such as registering for the university or depositing money at my school or university. He would say, "You're a kid. You're like girls. You'll get ripped off."
12. I am the only son in the family. I have two older sisters, but my older sister was considered more reliable than me. They trusted her more. When I finished middle school, I had come to hate public schools. I was under tremendous pressure. The school vice-principal made sexual advances towards me, which I refused. He harassed me as a result.
13. He would instruct kids to say nasty things to me. His proposed solution was for me to have relations with him so he would stop saying those things to the kids. I even told my father that he made this offer. After this the vice-principal changed his behavior so much that I hated studying at that school. For instance he would say I touched kids, while he was the one who asked kids to touch me.
14. I told my father and the school principal, but unfortunately the school principal was in cahoots with [the vice-principal]. Nonetheless, the principal as well as all the kids in school knew the vice-principal rapes one of the kids at school. It wasn't rape by coercion. They boy liked it. The principal knew this, but he denied it. The principal always defended him. All the kids at school knew about it. But the principal backed him up and said, "No. There is nothing of the sort. Ako is delusional. You could tell from the way he carries himself. He's effeminate. He's a Pisces." That's what he said to my father.
15. When I finished eighth grade, my father didn't let me go to a public high school. Instead, he took me to a private school, where the kids mostly came from well-to-do families. They had a different outlook and were more cultured. I would not stand out among them.

Private Video and Rape

16. When I was in the tenth grade I befriended one of my teachers in high school. He was thirty-two. He was not married. He was a physical education teacher. He knew the way in which the gay kids were different from the rest. I befriended him and realized he was gay too. During the three years I spent in

high school I had relations with him. We were pretty much partners. There were, of course, a lot of problems since we hid our relationship from others.

17. Generally speaking, we continued our lives in peace without any trouble until something happened, and I had to leave Iran. My physical education teacher was transferred to another city, and for this reason we would seldom see each other. I used my phone to take a video of the two of us, where we were sitting and chatting; it was a very normal relationship, but it showed that the two of us were gay. It was a tape that I took of us kissing each other. I had saved the file on my computer. Although my partner said it would be better to delete it, I put it off and didn't delete it. Unfortunately, after three months one of our neighbors got a hold of it.
18. This is how our neighbor found the private video. One day, when I wasn't home, he had come to reset the RAM for his phone. He said his laptop was broken. My father called me and said, "Give me your password. Our neighbor is here." Being afraid of my father, I gave the password. That's how he accessed my computer. He blackmailed me and my partner for a month.
19. Our neighbor was a member of the Revolutionary Guard. I know his name and rank. He could not be bought off with money, and he said that I had to have relations with him. He raped me three times.¹ My partner and I were both very frustrated with this situation. I lost about thirty kilos within a month after the incident. I was in a bad psychological condition. On the other hand, I was afraid to break this to my family. My family was very religious, belonging to the Salafi sect of Islam. The Sunnis on one side of my family were Salafi, which is a branch of Wahhabism. They were very radical, and I could not break it to them.
20. There was only one solution left, and that was to record a video of our neighbor while he raped me, so I could have a video of him as well. This way he wouldn't release my video. My partner placed the camera somewhere where he couldn't see it, and I invited him to my place.
21. I was afraid to tell him. Every day he would say, "If you give me a million tomans, I'll put an end to this. I'll return your video." I now had a video of him too.
22. On the fourth time he came to our house to rape me, my father saw us, and he ran away. I was left with my father.
23. My father called my uncle, and they tortured me as much as they could. They burned and flogged me. Every year my father kills [a sheep/cow] for the Eid-e-Qurban. He had a thick rope with which he strapped the cow's legs. He came with my uncle and strapped my hands and feet and started beating me up with a belt. My father went to get a knife saying, "I'll cut your head off. What did you do?" My uncle didn't let him. My father returned to the kitchen. He heated the knife and burned three places on my back, and the scars are still there.
24. They then strapped me and beat me up until I almost died. They beat me up so much that I defecated. They strapped me to the bed like a hostage. They wouldn't believe me. They said *hadd* must be applied to me.² The *hadd* varies in every sect. According to some of them, sodomy is punishable by

¹ The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda defined rape as a physical invasion of a sexual nature, committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive. Ako's neighbor had penetrative sex with Ako three times. Under this definition, Ako was raped by his neighbor, who had threatened to release Ako's private video if he did not sleep with him.

² *Shari'a*, or Islamic law, prescribes punishments for certain offenses. One category of crime and punishment as prescribed by *Shari'a* is called *hadd*. In plural, these punishments are called *hodud*, and they comprise a separate class of punishments from other *Shari'a* punishments or those that originate in the civil law.

execution. They said it must be proven to us whether you did this willingly or you were raped by force, in which case we wouldn't apply *hadd*.

25. After they beat me up, they went after that neighbor. He had taken his wife and child to the home of his wife's father. The town in which his wife's father lived, Miandoab, was close to us. My father went after them to Miandoab and told his wife what had happened.
26. [My neighbor] was Kurdish. He was Sunni but his wife was a Shi'a. Since he hid from my father, my father talked to his wife's family. Gradually, as my father and uncle's pressure on him and his family increased, he said to me, "I'll disseminate your videos. Your father is embarrassing me. Tell your father I'll embarrass him." I said, "You can't do something like that, because I have a video of you." He said, "That's impossible." I said, "Come and get a copy of it."
27. I had given a copy of this film to my partner. My partner gave it to our neighbor. When he saw the video, he calmed down a bit. He said, "You have my film, and I have your film. It's best if we leave each other alone and not bother each other." I said fine.
28. But only a day later I heard my father proudly saying that our neighbor's wife has asked for a divorce and that his wife's brothers know about it. I was really scared to hear this and wondered what I would do if he were to release this film.

Physical Abuse and Threats

29. Soon after this our neighbor stopped me on the street. He was riding a Toyota pickup truck belonging to the Revolutionary Guard. There were two other people with him. He pushed me inside the car and drove away. They were in plainclothes, and they were not wearing Revolutionary Guard uniforms.
30. They drove for ten minutes. Then they let me out of the truck. Although my whole body was scarred – it was only five or six days since I was beaten – they still beat me up again, saying if anyone gets a hold of this video they'll kill every member of my family. Unfortunately my family was to some extent political. I have an uncle in Canada who along with my two other uncles are involved in political activities relating to the Kurds, and this could easily be an excuse for my family to be harassed. They said if this film was to be shown, they'll kill my sister and mother right before your eyes, and I was sure they would do something like that.
31. I was afraid. Having been beaten up, I decided against showing it. I got home, but I didn't tell my father how much I was beaten, knowing this will only anger my father and lead him to take actions that would be to my detriment. The times were hard and painful. It's hard for me to talk about it. Within thirty days I lost about thirty-two kilos. They threatened me every day.

Dissemination of the Video and Leaving Iran

32. My partner called me a day after being beaten up. His brother had a store, and he had found out about the video being released. My partner said, "He has released our video, and I saw us hugging each other on several cell phones."
33. Within three hours, I had to pack up everything I had gathered in nineteen years of my life. My entire belongings were in a backpack. First I thought about going to Iraq. We have a lot of family members

in Iraq's Kurdistan, and my aunt lives there. However, I was afraid to go there because if my father wanted to find me, he would easily be able to do it. I decided to go to Turkey instead.

34. This time it wasn't a question of whether I was innocent or not. This time the issue was dishonoring a family and a tribe, and it's a case of having loved someone and having willingly started a relationship with him. I couldn't stay there. My partner handed me to a smuggler. As far as I know, my partner now lives on the borders of northern Khorasan, living in a Kurdish area without anyone knowing about his whereabouts or even his name.
35. Kurdish political parties contacted me several times asking me to give them the video in my possession, but I did not release it because I was afraid of causing trouble for my family. I'm in a very difficult financial situation here, because my family cannot help me. My family doesn't talk to me, and so it can't help me. Even large TV networks, such as Manoto said they're willing to get this video from me and reveal his identity without showing my face, but I feared for my family. My mother and two sisters are there. He is a well-known person and if I were to cause trouble for him, it wouldn't be too difficult.
36. In Turkey, I was threatened several times by my family. For instance, there was a relative in Turkey who I was forced to live with. My father said to him, "If my son comes to Kayseri, I'll kill every member of your family." I found out through several people that there are two people after me in Kayseri. I called Kaos GL, which is an organization supporting the LGBT refugees. I asked them to help me move. They brought me to Istanbul. Right now in Istanbul I'm afraid of many people who might have seen my picture on websites and other places. There are about eight to nine million Kurds in Istanbul and my father could pay some of them to abduct me and take me to the eastern strip of Turkey, the Kurdistan region, and turn me in to my father.