



Witness Statement of Raha

Name: Raha*

Place of Birth: Tehran, Iran

Date of Birth: September 15, 1989

Occupation: Hairdresser

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: August 3, 2013

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Raha. It was approved by Raha on May 27, 2014. There are 31 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.

* Pseudonym assigned to witness to protect her identity.

Witness Statement

Background

1. My name is Raha. I was born on September 15, 1989 in Tehran. I am a lesbian. I was a hairdresser before I left Iran.

Childhood

2. As early as I can remember, I used to be interested in my [female] classmates. At that time I attributed this to the fact that I was the only girl in my family and that there was no other girl around me. I had such a good relationship with my friends that when we would fight and stop speaking to each other, their mothers would come after me and ask me why I was not speaking to their daughters. They would ask us to make up. I was very close to my friends.
3. In middle school my feelings for my classmates were stronger. We went to school together, and I became [romantically] interested in them. At that age most girls were eager to find a boyfriend, but I could not understand this. I fell in love with one of my classmates in the 8th grade. I liked her, and the times we spent together were beautiful. I was seriously conflicted about this. My family was very religious, and accepting this issue was difficult for me.
4. I thought that maybe having a boy in my life could change things. I got a boyfriend and I had a relationship with him for a month. But I didn't have any feelings towards him, and the longer our relationship went the more I hated him. As a result, I ended that relationship. I could sense that my feelings about girls went beyond simple friendship. The smell of their perfume, and the way we talked and joked around intensified my feelings. Initially I thought this was just self-suggestion, but I gradually felt that there really was something missing.
5. I was nine when my father died. I had a very close relationship with my mother. We were like friends. I always told her everything. I was a child, and I talked to her about my feelings in a child-like manner. At the beginning she reacted by making jokes and laughing about it. But as time went by I realized that she was reacting badly. It seemed that she could not accept this. But I did not care. I was stubborn, and I would get my way. After a while I realized that I had a problem, and that my mother could not have a positive reaction to it. We would get into fights. My mother had heart disease. I had to take her to the hospital after we fought.
6. My father's family had a close relationship with my mother. The last time that my mother had a heart attack was after we had had a fight. My cousin was with us and she saw our fight. When my mom died, my cousin told everything to her dad.

Living with My Uncle's Family

7. After my mom died I was forced to live with my paternal uncle's family. My uncle's family told me that my behavior had caused my mother's death. They'd say that whether this was real or whether I had convinced myself [of my homosexuality], I had killed my mom by the way I acted. My uncle always beat me up. I was beaten in a way that caused my facial nerve to be paralyzed. I cannot hear through my left ear, and I have problems with my right eyelid.
8. At that time I was 17 years old, and Internet had become much more accessible. I had found out my sexual orientation through studying and meeting with individuals who I felt were similar to me. I had spent a very difficult time, and by that time I had come to believe that there was nothing wrong with me. Instead, I had concluded that there was something wrong with the people [who criticize homosexuality].

School

9. I followed my classmates' lives very closely because I was interested in them. I always had problems with my classmates. I could not swallow the fact that they went out with boys. I liked to tell them that going out with boys was not right. I told them that it was unseemly and a sin. We had a counselor who told me that this was not any of my business. But I was always in a fight with someone. For instance, if I saw a girl was going out with her boyfriend, I would fight with her. As a result I was doing poor academically.
10. I got into a relationship with a girl when I was in the 9th grade. She was my classmate and my neighbor. We were very close. When girls sit next to each other they talk about things that seem funny for men. Girls make child-like jokes, and they talk about liking sex or liking a boy. [I told her that] I liked her and that I wanted to be around her. She thought I was joking. I repeatedly told her that it would be great if we were together. I had feelings too, and it bothered me that I sat next to her but I couldn't do anything with her. I was very attached to her. Eventually I told her that I wanted to be with her, but that I didn't know whether she liked it or not. She told our teacher and the school principal. They called me to the principal's office and told me not to say these things any more.
11. When they called me to the principal's office they asked me what I had told her. I said that I suggested that we should be girlfriends. They asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "I like her. I'm a girl and I like girls. Sometimes friends like each other. There's no problem." They told me to wait there until they decided what to do about me. They called my aunt and asked her to come to the school. She came to the school and asked what was going on. They told her what had happened. Since she knew [about my orientation] she reacted in a cool manner. She told them that she would take me home and talk to me. She told them that I had just acted in a childish manner and this was just a mistake. We went home. I took a serious beating that night from my family.

12. It was about this time that I began sitting on a solitary chair in school.¹ I sat on a solitary chair at the end of the classroom. They [school officials] would tell me to sit on a solitary chair because there was no other space available. I would say that there is space on the benches, but they would respond that my classmates needed that space for their backpacks. I was alone during recess because our vice principal always had a loudspeaker and kept an eye on me so that I would not approach any other student. This was at Imam Sajjad school at the vicinity of Tohid Square in Tehran.
13. When I was sitting among other kids, [the vice principal] would immediately call me to the office. When I went to the office, she would say, “What were you talking about?” I would say it was about school work. She would say, “There’s no need for that. Go sit in the classroom.” When I went to the classroom and my classmates came inside, the school officials would tell me to go the courtyard. I was sent back and forth. So I decided not to go the courtyard and to stay in the classroom during recess. That way nobody would be near me. I tried to get used to this.
14. The girl who I liked changed her school and I did the same so that I could be with her. I don’t know why her family didn’t ask questions but I always tried to be next to her. She stopped coming to school when we were in the 11th grade. I don’t know whether she moved to another town or not. I don’t know what happened to her. But my problems continued because I had new relationships in the new academic year. At that time my mother passed away as well, and my academic work suffered. I sensed that my uncle’s family had hired someone to watch me.
15. I could not accept that a girl whom I liked would date a guy when she’s outside the school. I expected her to be with me and I could not make her understand. Therefore, I always fought with the girl who I liked. I also got into verbal spats with school administrators. When I went to the principal’s office they would ask me why I was doing all this. I’d say, “You don’t know what being responsible means. You have to control the kids.” I eventually had to drop out of school in the 11th grade. Being alone and the pressure that my family put on me [made me decide to] drop out.

Life after Dropping Out

16. I tried to continue my education at an adult education program. But at that time everyone in my family knew that I was a lesbian. I was only able to attend the program for three months because my family kept telling me that I should get married. I could not accept this.
17. My aunt was a religious woman, and she would tell me that if I sat to eat with their family I would bar God’s bounty from reaching their table. She would say that the only reason I was there was that my parents were very dear to them and that they were obligated to tolerate me. Therefore, I preferred to eat in my room so that God’s bounty would not disappear from their table.

¹ Classrooms in Iranian schools typically have benches, and each bench seats two or three students.

18. I was depressed. I would cry over every little thing, anything that you can imagine. I had become aggressive. Since I was very depressed, I didn't even feel like taking a shower. I didn't even want to socialize with anyone. There were many girls in our family, but the way they acted around me was very bad. I couldn't go to family gatherings. When I went, the girls would cover their hair when they sat next to me. This was very strange to me. What did this mean? We were two women sitting in a house, and there were no men around. Why should she cover her hair in front of me? I preferred to be by myself. Things got so bad that I was self-destructing. I decided to register for a hairdressing class to lift my spirits.
19. I registered for hairdressing school, and I attended the classes. My uncle inquired about it and asked me where I was going and how it was going to work out. I thought that this was his responsibility because I was living with him. In his opinion, the more I was removed from his family, the better it would be for them. He didn't like me to talk to his children. As I went to my classes, my mood gradually improved. I stayed in the hairdressing school as long as I could [on the days I went there]. I tried not to finish up early so that I wouldn't have to go home. I wanted to take advantage of my time away from home as much as possible. Over there [at school] I was comfortable. No one knew who I was or what my problem was. I got along with people easier.
20. I took general hairdressing courses for a year or two. I wanted to take specialized courses so that I could work. My family was a military family. My uncle worked in the military and my father was a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. After my father's death I received survivor's benefits. I paid my own tuition. After I finished my courses, I started working at the second salon. That's where I had attended my specialized courses.

Revelation of Homosexual Relations

21. I worked in that salon until mid-June of 2013. There, I found someone who was like me. The most tumultuous period of my life started from there. She was my classmate. We had registered together. I thought she was a lesbian. We had been friends for three to four years and I could see that she was similar to me. We were so close that when my uncle's family saw her they thought we were in a relationship, but I told them that she was just a friend. [Regarding my own homosexuality,] I told them that it was just a delusion. I said this because I wanted to rid myself of their suspicions. I told them that I had been delusional for a while and that it was over. I told them that I was interested in men, and I apologized that I had caused them pain during that period. I told them that she was my close friend and that we were spending time together. Our families became acquainted. Incidentally, her family was a military family as well. This was something our families had in common, and it connected our families.
22. Our relationship lasted four years. Its climax, and its worst moment, was on a night when my uncle's family was invited to a party. This was in late April of 2013. My uncle's family was supposed to stay over for the night. I had been having sexual relations with that girl. She had suggested it, and we didn't have any problems with it. After four years I felt a very strong

attachment. My other relationships were not very serious, but this one meant a lot to me. That night she came to my place. We had some drinks, and we were not in an altered state. My uncle came home and saw us as we were having sex.

23. We got into a physical altercation with my uncle. It was a very bad situation. My friend got beaten up too. I took responsibility for everything, and I said that I had made her do this. I said that it was not her fault at all. I supported her so that she wouldn't get beaten up for my sake. My uncle called her family and they came over. My uncle said, "Don't you know what your daughter does?" He told them that their daughter had caused this. I didn't know what to do, and I just denied it. It was a horrible situation.
24. Her family filed a complaint against me. They said they would take me to court. The issue that made this worse was that we had lost our virginity together. This was unacceptable to her family. They had taken her to a doctor, and they had found out that it was all over and she no longer was "whole". They decided to file a complaint against me. My uncle, however, was able to take care of this problem. He didn't want this to go to court. My paternal aunt worked at the women's ward of Rajae Shahr Prison. My cousin worked at the same prison as well. They could have easily taken me out of prison if they wanted. But they didn't want it to get to that, and they were able to take care of it.
25. Her father had filed a complaint. He came to our house accompanied by a soldier. They gave me summons, and they said that I should appear at court for questioning. The summons was issued by the Sa'adat Abad General Court. My uncle took the summons from me right away. He said, "There is no need for you to get involved. I will take care of it." I had no idea what happened. Three days went by and nobody said anything. I got it out of my aunt that the problem has been resolved. She said that I did not have to think about it and that we were no longer discussing it. This was difficult for me. For them it was over, but for me it was just the beginning. My family was pressuring me to get married. I told them that I didn't want to. I thought that things could not get any worse, so I told them that this was my story. I said, "I spoke for all these years, but you didn't hear me. I denied it for a while, and you still didn't realize it. But now you understand that I don't have a problem."
26. My uncle threatened me and said, "Either you kill yourself, or I will kill you." I wanted to live. Why should I have killed myself? I said, "Kill me if you can." We started to fight. He cut my face with a knife. I still have the scar. I escaped my uncle's house that night. I went to a hospital to treat my wound. This was in June 2013.
27. I went to the hospital and I said that I wanted to file a complaint but I didn't have any evidence. I felt that I was bleeding heavily. I thought that I will find a way to gather the evidence. A nurse saw me and asked me what had happened. She said that they had to notify the police because the wound was not a regular wound. I said okay. Then I thought that if the police came they would ask me to file a complaint. Then, if my uncle's family would get to court they would talk about my situation. What could I do then?! I decided against filing a complaint. Instead, I went to the hospital in which my mom used to work. I told them that I had got into a fight with my brother. My brother was deaf. We always got into fights. People at the hospital were familiar with our

fights because my mother used to tell them about it. I attributed my wound to my brother and I fighting. They stitched and bandaged my wound. That's how I resolved this. Then I thought about where I could go next.

Escaping Home and Leaving Iran

28. I thought, "Where should I go? What should I do? With what money?" I decided to return home. There was a way to get to my room without being seen by people in the house. I got myself into my room with a lot of difficulty, but I avoided being seen by them. I picked up my ID and other things that I would need. My uncle found out that I was there. He chased me into the alley, and I escaped. I went to stay with one of my close friends. I stayed with her for a week. Then I went to the hair salon to ask about my girlfriend. We had a number of mutual friends and we would get information about each other from them. They told me that she has left Tehran and got married. "This fast?" I asked. They said yes. It was at this point that I really doubted our relationship. We were together for four years. How could she get married?!
29. I knew that my uncle was trying to find me and he would certainly harm me. I thought that it would be better if I left Iran. I was mentally prepared for this because my girlfriend and I had discussed this scenario before, and we had concluded that we could have a much better life if we left Iran. This was how I decided to leave Iran. I was afraid. I thought that they would look for me anywhere I go and they would find me. I considered all the possibilities.
30. I had an online chat with my cousin after leaving Iran. She asked me where I was. I said, "Somewhere in this country, what difference does it make?" I talked in a way that reassured her that I was still in Iran. She said, "Just watch out. If we find you, you will not live. From now on we don't have anything to do with you. We just don't want to see you again." "Okay," I said.
31. My uncle beat me repeatedly during all those years. He beat me very severely. He would say, "I hope that when I wake up the next morning I see that you are not breathing." He had said this repeatedly over the years. But this last episode brought our confrontation to a climax.