



Witness Statement of Saye Sky

Name: Saye Sky (Pseudonym)

Place of Birth: Tehran, Iran

Date of Birth: 1990

Occupation: Rap Artist / Social activist

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: April 12, 2010

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to a live interview with Ms. Saye Sky. The statement consists of 49 paragraphs and 8 pages. The interview was conducted on April 12, 2010. The statement was approved by Saye Sky on July 2, 2010.

Statement

My Early Life

1. My name is Saye Sky (pseudonym). I was born in 1989 and raised by a very religious family living in the heart of Tehran, Iran. I studied electrical engineering and also performed rap music in Iran.
2. Around or about 2003, I discovered I was a lesbian. I kept this fact to myself out fear of the reaction of both my family and the Islamic Republic. I have no doubt that if either found out about my sexuality, I would have been killed.

My Rap Music in Iran

3. I was 18 years old when I started rapping. I had written my first song a long time before, but I couldn't record or produce it because I didn't know anyone in the industry who would help me. Between the time when I started writing and the recording/producing part of my career, I sang at underground parties for Tehran's lesbian population.
4. In Iran, recording and producing rap music presents a number of different challenges. The Islamic Republic discourages rap music altogether and for that reason the genre is recorded and produced entirely underground. Furthermore, because the Islamic Republic opposes women making music of any kind, finding a producer willing to work with me was difficult. Finally, due to the sensitive nature of the topics I covered in my music, finding producers became exponentially more difficult. All of the aforementioned obstacles were somehow created or influenced by the Islamic Republic. Producers feared the legal repercussions they faced for producing my music and the legal repercussions I faced for recording my music. It took me a very long time to find someone who was willing to produce my music as I wrote it, regardless of the consequences.
5. Thus far, I have recorded three of my songs. My first song is about homosexuals and the social relationships between men and women in Iran. My second song is about transsexuals living in Iran and the difficulties they face from both their families and the Islamic Republic. My third song has not yet been released but it is entitled "Waking Up" and is a true story about lesbians living in Iran.
6. Once produced, disseminating my music presented another set of challenges. For the same reasons people were unwilling to produce my music, most websites were unwilling to sponsor my music. Website owners feared the legal repercussions they faced for sponsoring the music of a lesbian rap artist. For this reason, it took me a very long time to find websites that were willing to upload my songs.

My Life as a Lesbian Living in Iran

7. I know a great number of homosexuals living in Iran. Homosexuals in Iran learn of one other by word of mouth and by association with other homosexuals. For example, suppose I have two gay friends and a new girlfriend. Now suppose my new girlfriend has two other gay friends. Naturally, our friends will meet one another through our dating and will become friends. In this way, the homosexual community in Iran develops.

8. The unassisted bond between two homosexuals takes much more time to cultivate. In Iran, you can't simply proclaim your homosexuality to a stranger. You need to make sure that the person you're telling is a trustworthy individual. For example, I met my college girlfriend in our physical education class. After taking some time to get to know her, I mustered the courage to ask her whether she had a boyfriend. After informing me that she did not, she asked me whether I had a boyfriend, to which I responded that I also did not. I think we both suspected we knew the reason why the other was single, but it took even more time and courtship before I finally admitted to her that I was a lesbian. This admission was very dangerous. She could have been a government agent or simply someone scared to associate with homosexuals. Thankfully, she was neither of those things and we were able to continue our courtship.
9. Due to the repercussions of coming out, homosexuals living in Iran can only associate with one another at secret underground parties. These parties are extremely risky to attend because they are targeted and sometimes raided by Iranian authorities looking to arrest homosexuals. Consequently, you might receive the invitation to such a party 5-6 hours before it is supposed to convene and might also be sent 2-3 different addresses (with nobody knowing what the correct address really is). While I was never caught at one of these parties (I hardly ever attended due to the risk), I have friends who were caught and taken to prison for their attendance.
10. Moreover, homosexuals in Iran need to be on the lookout for government agents at all times; in all walks of life. We frequently had spies attempting to infiltrate our social circles. The government sometimes instructed young people to dress in provocative clothing and go to the university to speak ill of the government, the police and the clergy. The spies would make these statements and take note of who approached them and who befriended them. The entire process was designed to gather intelligence and infiltrate the circles of opposition groups. Consequently, we were very careful about who we allowed into our closely knit social circle.

Police Harassment

11. I was detained by Iranian authorities on many different occasions.
12. In 2008, my friends and I were stopped by a police van as we walked down the street. After the van stopped, police officers piled out and forced us inside. Once inside the van, the police officers treated us roughly, scolding us about our outfits and swearing at us. One of the officers ripped my belt off and yelled, "What is this you've attached to yourself?" I said nothing. Fed up by their actions, my friend screamed, "You don't have the right to speak to her that way!" The officer turned to her and struck her twice in her face. All the while, he continued to swear at us and told us that he would "do something that would make us sorry we were girls." I do not believe they had any legitimate reason for stopping us, other than to harass us. This kind of treatment was very common in Iran.
13. Again in 2008, some college classmates and I were stopped by police officers as we walked past the police station. The officers came outside of the station and ordered us inside. I do not believe they had any legitimate reason to do this other than the fact that we were three girls and four boys walking down the street together.

14. After we entered the police station, an officer separated the boys from the girls and ordered the girls into an interrogation room. As we entered the room, he stood across the table from us, took off his coat and sat down.
15. My friend, who was very upset with the officer, turned to him and yelled, "What have we done? Why are you doing this to us?" The officer replied, "If you say one more word, I will do something that will make you sorry that you ever opened your mouth!" I collected my thoughts and calmly asked, "Excuse me officer, what seems to be the problem?" The officer turned to me and asked, "How old are you?" I told him, "18." He asked, "And how old do you think I am?" I told him, "I don't know how old you are." "Are you 50?" my friend interrupted. The officer glared at her and said, "I'll make sure you get a few days of solitary for that comment." My other friend turned to him and stated, "Well, you must be 40." He told her, "You will avoid solitary, but you will probably still need to go somewhere where you can drink some cold water". Finally, I turned to the officer and posited, "Well how about 25 or 30?" He turned to me and smiled, "It seems like you understand my language."
16. At that point, the officer ordered us to take off our sunglasses. Once we removed our sunglasses, he looked at each of us in a way that made me feel very uncomfortable; as if he was using our presence there for his gratification, sexual or otherwise. He said a number of things that increased my feeling of discomfort. For example, on one occasion he turned to one of my friends and asked where she colored her hair because it was very pretty. On another occasion, he turned to my other friend and told her that the skin of her neck was very soft and seemed to be pure. I did not know what we had done to deserve such harassment. I did not know what the officer wanted with us or how we would ultimately escape that situation. I was scared for myself and my friends.
17. The entire time we were being interrogated, we could hear the other officers swearing at the boys and beating them just outside the interrogation room. These sounds served to increase the fear and anxiety we felt inside of the interrogation room. I have no doubt that the boys were deliberately placed within earshot to create that fear and anxiety. It was a very effective technique.
18. Ultimately, the officer let us go but only after he took my telephone number and instructed me to call him. I believe he thought I would be willing to have sex with him in exchange for letting us go.

Last Days as a Student

19. In mid-2007, I was forced to leave university after 1.5 years of attendance. My girlfriend and I had made the mistake of kissing one another in one of the university's hallways. One of our fellow classmates saw us kissing and reported the action to the school officials.
20. The school officials sought us out and put a great deal of pressure on us to determine what happened. At first we told them nothing happened and that they were simply mistaken. They informed us they had a witness who saw "two girls kissing in the hallway" and that we were the primary suspects. They interrogated the two of us for several hours, abusing us both verbally and mentally. Ultimately, I told the interrogators that the informant may have seen me calming my friend down because she was upset about something but there was never any kissing involved.
21. At no point in this process did I feel comfortable simply telling school officials that I was, in fact, a lesbian. If you want to survive in Iran you need to play certain cards close to your chest;

homosexuality is one of them. This is due to the legal repercussions not only of being a homosexual, but of being found to have assisted homosexual acts by not reporting them to the proper authorities.

22. At this time, my family learned through school that I was attracted to the same sex but they did not want to accept it because they are extremely religious people. They believed I was suffering from some sort of psychological abnormality and sent me to a psychiatrist, prohibited me from participating in sports classes, and imprisoned me at home.
23. Ultimately, I was forced to leave the school over the incident.

Participation in the Post Election Protests

24. I attended a number of protests in Tehran after the June 12, 2009 presidential elections. I suffered blows to my back, my legs, my feet, my arms and even my neck.
25. On one occasion, around the middle of June, I attended a student rally in front of the University of Tehran in opposition to the recent election results. There were only 400-500 student protesters on that day and we were grossly outnumbered by the *Basij* who surrounded us on both sides. Our cell phone service had been shut off by the Islamic Republic so we could not contact one another and set up additional protests around the city.
26. The *Basij* fired tear gas and pepper spray into the crowd and also fired live rounds into the air to get us to disperse. The *Basij* who fired upon us that day were not Iranians; they were Arabs. They yelled at us in Arabic. It seemed clear the Islamic Republic hired mercenaries from neighboring Arab countries to control the crowds after the disputed elections.
27. The *Basij* also had attachments to their automobiles that would mow people down as they drove by. These attachments would spin along with their wheels and made a deafening sound as they made contact with the protestors. The attachments would have been illegal for any civilian to have, but the *Basij* used them openly and with impunity.
28. On that day and throughout the protests, the *Basij* chased us through the alleys and strangers opened their homes to us for sanctuary. The *Basij* pounded their fists on the doors ordering the homeowners to let them in. When the homeowners obliged, the *Basij* rushed into the home, taking the protesters off with them. Otherwise, we waited until the *Basij* left and then headed back into the streets.
29. In spite of the numerous dangers, we were not deterred. We wanted our rights and we wanted our votes to be counted. This particular protest lasted from 9 PM until 2:30 AM.
30. On another occasion, I saw an officer walk up to a boy, who was no more than 20, put a gun to his head and say, "I'll kill you, I swear I'll kill you." The officer then began counting down, "3 ... 2 ... 1." Luckily, before he could fire the boy's friends came to his rescue and pulled the boy away. Irritated, the officer fired his weapon into the air several times. It was a very frightening moment because I truly believed the officer would have shot the boy had it not been for the boy's friends.

31. On another occasion, I saw a group of officers severely beating two young girls in the street. The girls were standing helplessly by a wall with their hands over their heads in a futile attempt to protect themselves from the blows of the male officers. Enraged, I jumped on the back of one of the officers to try to pull him away from the girls. As I struggled with the officer, I felt a warm sensation on the back of my neck. I turned around to find another officer beating me with his baton.
32. The officers generally had three different kinds of batons. They either used an electric baton, a thin, stick-like baton, or a thick baton that resembled a club. On that day, I was beaten with the club-like baton.
33. The officer who beat me wore brown clothing. There was no insignia, but he had the same hat and stripes on his shoulder as all of the other soldiers.
34. Thankfully, on that day other protestors came to our rescue. Our rescuers greatly outnumbered the officers and by surrounding them. They bought us enough time to escape the vicious attack. I grabbed one of the girls by the hand and we ran towards a safe house. The other girl ran in the other direction. I felt lucky to escape with my life.
35. In late June or early July (2009), I was attacked by two women for wearing a green article of clothing. The women pushed me up against a wall, swore at me and insulted me. They screamed, "Are you wearing green because you're against the government?" What could I say? This just happened to be the color of my clothing. What did they want me to do, go home and change? One of the women looked me in the eyes and coldly said, "One by one, we'll take care of you."
36. During my attack, I saw an officer on the street who yelled at the women, "Go ahead and break her arms and legs, let me see if you know how!" I know he was an officer because he had three stars on his shoulder and an officer's uniform.
37. Later on during the summer of 2009, there was a rally in support of the Ahmadinejad in Tehran. The Islamic Republic bussed their supporters into the city from the countryside. I know this because I saw the busses coming in. The people on the busses weren't dressed like they were from Tehran; they were dressed like people who lived in the countryside. They brought their entire families with them. Children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and grandparents were all on the busses. The Ahmadinejad supporters brought signs that read "We Want Khamenei" or "We Want Ahmadinejad."
38. Throughout the protests, I saw the *Basij* giving weapons to people [*Basij* members in plain clothes] dressed in civilian clothes looking to break up the protests. In the early morning and late at night, I saw *Basij* vans stop by large crowds of people. The doors of the vans would open and *Basij* would pile out. Remaining inside the van were cartons of weapons which were spread among the *Basij* [in civilians clothes]. These [plainclothes *Basij*] forces were given tear gas, batons and pepper spray. They hid in the streets, waiting for protesters to walk by, so they could attack.

Escape from Iran

39. Around November 2009, I noticed my telephone made a strange beeping noise whenever I picked it up to call my girlfriend living abroad. I did not take it seriously. My girlfriend and I talked

about everything over the telephone. We talked about the difficulties of being a homosexual in Iran and we talked about my rap career. We talked about the subjects I could not talk about with anyone else. I assumed the beeping noise was associated with the difficulties of calling internationally from Iran and thought nothing of it.

40. In October 2009, I had an anonymous phone interview with a homosexual magazine, Neda, in Canada and Radio Zaman in Holland about my rap music. Before that I had noticed two beeping sounds whenever I made a call. One was right at the beginning of the call and the second after I was connected to my destination. I noticed that these two beeps occurred at the beginning of the interview. I called my telephone company to see if they could find a way to fix the problem. (My internet service was disconnected but my phone line was active.) After transferring me to three different technicians, I realized that this might be something more than a simple technical problem and decided to ask a friend of mine who had expertise in the field.
41. After looking at the telephone line, my normally stoic friend came out of my bedroom crying. He told me that the government had been taping my telephone conversations for months. Immediately, my mind raced to the conversations I had with my girlfriend. The Islamic Republic knew I was a lesbian, they knew I was a rap artist, they knew about my interviews with foreign media outlets and what I had said to them, they knew about my participation in the election protests. The Islamic Republic knew everything that I had strived so hard to keep from them. They knew my most dangerous secrets. At that moment, I knew it was no longer safe to live in Iran and I wanted to leave immediately.
42. I told my family I had to leave Tehran for the countryside. When they asked me why, I told them it was because of my participation in the protests. They beat me severely after learning of my participation but eventually let me go. I packed my belongings into a backpack and left for the countryside. The countryside was generally safer than Tehran because it was less regulated, because the government would not be looking for me there, and because if the Islamic Republic wanted to find me in the countryside, they would have to broaden their search considerably, making it much more expensive to find me.
43. My plan was to find someone who could smuggle me out of the country quickly and quietly. After some time, I found a man who was willing to help but required that I pay him and that somewhere along the road I might have to allow a number of men to use me sexually. I didn't want to risk such a fate, so I decided to wait until I could get out of Iran legally.
44. In the meantime, I was forced to wait. I knew nobody in the countryside and had no money of my own. Each day was a struggle to find food, water and shelter. What money I had was transferred to my bank card from friends' accounts. When I found places to stay, it was because friends of mine in Tehran had telephoned their distant relatives in the countryside and begged them to let me stay with them for a night or two. Usually, strangers would be hesitant to help me. After all, when you see a young girl in the countryside with nothing but a backpack it is very likely that she is running from the Islamic Republic. People didn't want to get involved because they were scared of the consequences. Sometimes there was no food or shelter and I was forced to sleep under a car or in the woods. This period of 3-4 weeks was very difficult for me.
45. While in the countryside, I caught wind of the fact that the government had issued a warrant for my arrest and was looking for me. First, my friend from home (the one who had informed me of the wiretapping) had a friend inside in the police force who informed him that my name had come up on a wanted list. Second, my neighbors in Iran called me to inform me that a bearded man had knocked on their door claiming to be someone who was looking to marry me and wanted to know

more information about where I was and who my friends were. It is likely that the Islamic Republic sent that man to my house in order to determine where I might be hiding and who might be assisting me. Although I never saw the arrest warrant itself, I am 100% certain that it existed and that the Islamic Republic was actively searching for me just before I left.

46. After three weeks in the countryside, I returned to Tehran in order to finish my second song. I was extremely worried about my return to the city and that I would be caught before I could leave again for the countryside. Still, the studio was in Tehran and I wanted to record my song before I left the country. While in Tehran, I could not find a moment of tranquility. With every sound and every movement, I thought the agents of the Islamic Republic had found me and that my life was over. The stress was absolutely unbearable. Thankfully, I recorded the song and left for the countryside undetected.
47. In late February (2010), my contact told me he was getting closer to a solution and that I should be ready to leave at any moment. I told him I was ready but I still had one last problem to tackle: my passport was still at my home with my family in Tehran. Getting my passport from my family would be tricky because they would not be likely to give it up willingly. They would probably be suspicious of the fact I had been in the countryside for so long and my sudden need for my passport. If they found out I was a lesbian, they would be just as likely to kill me as the Islamic Republic. My only option was to take it from them without their knowing.
48. I returned home to Tehran and sustained heavy beatings from my family for my time spent in the countryside. My mother held me down as my brother beat me with his belt. The entire time, they yelled obscenities at me; “We don’t know what you’re doing!” “You’re broken!” “There’s something wrong with you!” “We don’t know anything about your comings and goings!” “We don’t want you in the house anymore!” They yelled at me and beat me for spending three weeks in the countryside.
49. During my short but painful stint at home, I was able to recover my passport and left home pretending I was going to my sister’s home but I left again for the countryside. Shortly thereafter, my contact called me and told me that my paperwork was ready and I could leave the country. I bought a ticket from Turkish Airlines and left Iran by plane. I was unable to take any personal belongings because authorities checked my bags at the gate and I didn’t want to give them any reason to stop me from traveling. All I brought with me were the clothes in my backpack, \$100 in cash, my passport and my government issued ID card. Thankfully, I was able to pass through security and find refuge in Turkey.