

# 'She insulted my manhood': murder underlines Turkey's LGBT backlash

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**In a country where anti-gay violence is often excused as unjust provocation, a fatal shooting has raised fresh fears**



Bahar (not her real name) looks at a photo of Simge Avcı on her phone. Photograph: Laura Neumann

Simge Avcı loved practical jokes, says her roommate Bahar, recalling how her friend would giggle after pretending to spill the contents of an empty teapot on her startled victims.

Bahar (not her real name), 25, had lived with Avcı for seven years in Samsun, a small, sleepy city on the Black Sea coast of [Turkey](#).

On 13 July, the roommates went out for a long breakfast with Avcı's boyfriend, Mecit Sezer, and her mother. They chatted as they ate and later went to a local pool to combat the sweltering heat. "It was a normal day," says Bahar.

The group parted company at about 7pm. Less than five hours later, Avcı was shot in the stomach and died.

Sezer, her boyfriend of six months, has been arrested, but not charged. Sezer has [reportedly claimed](#) that Avcı "insulted his manhood".

If someone has long hair and breasts as a trans woman, they're excluded from society

*Deniz*

Bahar and Avcı are both trans women. At 24, Avcı had just started her transition. She was excited about getting surgery, and being able to live fully and honestly with her family.

Once the home of one of the [largest LGBT pride marches in the wider region](#), in recent years there has been a growing backlash against the community in Turkey. Pride marches were banned four years ago. People who have taken to the streets have been met with [teargas](#) and violent dispersals.

In 2017 all public LGBT events in Ankara, the capital, were [banned](#). Earlier this month, the head of Turkey's public broadcaster TRT [said that Turkey would not rejoin Eurovision](#) if it continued to have

contestants like “the bearded Austrian in the skirt” – in reference to 2014’s winner, [Conchita](#).

“There’s this constant emphasis on one nation, one religion, one ethnicity. Everything is consolidated around this uniformity of what it means to be a Turkish citizen who deserves to live,” says Asli Zengin, an LGBT activist and visiting professor at Brown University’s anthropology department.

[Transgender](#) women are especially vulnerable to violence. Discrimination means it can be difficult to find jobs; many are forced into sex work to survive, putting them at even greater risk. Institutionally, the court system is stacked against them. Under Turkish law an “unjust provocation” can lower sentences. In cases of violence against transgender women, men will often say they did not know the woman was trans and, like Sezer, that she “insulted their manhood” as evidence for an “unjust provocation”.

“Often, judges use their discretion to interpret the whole interaction between a transgender woman and a cisgender man – and their sexual intercourse – as a trigger of unjust provocation,” explains Zengin.



Turkish police officers fire teargas and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators who gathered for a banned gay pride rally in Istanbul. Photograph: Emrah Gurel/AP

Yasemin Öz, a Turkish LGBT rights activist and lawyer, says the number of judges willing to accept an “insult to manhood” as a reason for an unjust provocation defence has decreased over the years, as LGBT lawyers and activists have worked on more of these cases. Nevertheless, it remains potent: in a recent case, the killers of a gay Syrian refugee [murdered](#) in 2016 [were given a reduced sentence](#) on grounds of “unjust provocation”.

In places like Samsun, where there are no LGBT organisations advocating for the rights of the local community, the situation is even more insecure. “It all depends on the attitude of the judge, unfortunately,” says Öz. “But where there are no LGBT organisations, the attitude change can be slower.”

Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir all have multiple LGBT organisations that provide legal and social support to the community. Samsun is a quiet, traditional city in a part of the country that has consistently voted for the conservative ruling party AKP.

Deniz, 25, a trans woman who did not want to reveal her last name, says some trans women in Samsun do not like to leave the house. “If someone has long hair and breasts as a trans woman, they’re excluded from society,” she says. Deniz recently stopped taking hormones and cut her hair so she could pass more easily on the street. Her family does not accept her as a trans woman, and she says she doesn’t feel safe going outside while presenting as female.

In contrast, Avcı’s family accepted her, and were able to help her financially. Her friends are full of anecdotes about her generosity. “If she saw someone on the street, she would give them 100 Turkish lira,” recalls Can, a 22-year-old trans woman and friend of Avcı’s.

“There is this sense of masculinity, which feels entitled to anything,” says Zengin. “Impunity is becoming the norm ... it’s not only transgender murders, but also cis women whose murders have reached a [statistically high](#) number in Turkey.”

In Samsun, this feeling is visceral. After Avcı’s death the community was in shock. “We wondered if this is how we’re going to die in the end,” says Can. For many in the LGBT community, the atmosphere in Samsun is now tinged with fear. Avcı’s death has made the dangers starker.

“I feel alone now,” says Bahar. “We’d understand each other just by looks, not even through talking. We were together every day ... I can’t express it. I still don’t believe that it’s real, I still don’t believe she’s gone.”

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### **Pesha Magid and Laura Neumann**

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### **P.S.**

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