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Armenian activist won't stop fight for trans rights - despite the threats

Thursday 8 September 2022, by [MARTIROSYAN Lucy](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2022).

Lilit Martirosyan continues to campaign for a hate crime law, legal gender recognition and transgender health care

There has been no legislation passed for LGBTIQ rights in Armenia since leading trans activist Lilit Martirosyan's historic speech to the National Assembly in 2019 – but, she argues, at least she has brought some visibility to the country's transgender and gay communities.

"After my speech, Nikol Pashinyan's government started to speak more about LGBTIQ issues," said Martirosyan. "[Former] governments never spoke about LGBTIQ people."

Martirosyan is the founder of the Right Side, a non-governmental transgender and sex workers' rights group in Yerevan. On 5 April 2019, she became the first out trans woman to speak in the Armenian parliament, [calling for](#) an end to violence and discrimination towards trans people.

In response, she was met with online death threats, doxxing, and calls by parliamentarians to have her [burned alive](#). When Martirosyan tried to report the threats to the police, they laughed at her, she said. Most health centres also turned her away when she sought treatment for the panic attacks she'd developed.

"After my speech at the National Assembly, everybody started recognising my face," Martirosyan told openDemocracy in a video call from her apartment in Yerevan. "I started receiving hate messages not only on my social media platforms, but on the streets, in shops, and other places."

Nowadays, to avoid public harassment, she wears a mask whenever she steps foot outside her home, even though COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted in Yerevan.

Though awareness about transgender people in Armenia has increased thanks to her speech, living openly as a trans activist remains extremely hard in this conservative country. Nevertheless, Martirosyan refuses to leave.

"Of course, I can take my passport and go to different European countries or to the US, but my community is here," she said. "Transgender people, especially transgender women, are in a bad situation here."

No such thing as 'hate crime' in Armenia

Martirosyan stresses the urgent need for a hate crime law, legal gender recognition and access to trans health care in Armenia.

There is no legal definition of 'hate crime' in Armenian law. As a result, law enforcement agencies

don't collect data about such crimes. Out of 113 incidents of harassment against LGBTIQ people in the last two years, only 27 cases were reported to the police, but none of them was considered a hate crime, [according to a survey by the Right Side](#).

Acknowledging the potential for human rights violations, the Council of Europe's Committee of Equality and Non-Discrimination last year [recommended](#) that Armenia adopt effective legislation and "policies to strengthen action against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sexual characteristics".

The lack of protection against discrimination and harassment in the workplace makes earning a living difficult for transgender people in the country. Many, Martirosyan included, get into sex work to provide an income.

"I have a lot of transgender friends doing sex work," she explained. She provides psychological and legal support for sex workers at the Right Side. "[Clients] say: 'We're tired of it, but we need money for the apartment because we don't have any support from the government.'"

Lack of access to gender-affirming care and legal recognition

Martirosyan is also [taking a case to the European Court of Human Rights](#) in which an Armenian trans man's application to correct his gender marker on his birth certificate from 'female' to 'male' was denied by Armenian courts. Currently, the Ministry of Justice requires paperwork proving a trans person's sex-reassignment surgery – a medical intervention that's outlawed in Armenia and costly to do abroad, and which not everyone wants to go through.

"It's a big problem, because there are transgender people who don't want sex reassignment surgery," Martirosyan explained. She was the first trans woman in Armenia to legally change her name on her passport in 2015. She changed the gender marker to 'F' in 2021.

Access to hormone treatment is also a problem in the country. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some Russian and Ukrainian trans refugees who fled to Yerevan [sought support from the Right Side](#). Martirosyan regrets that she couldn't direct them to gender-affirming healthcare, including access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

In January 2021, the Right Side provided at least 18 trans people with free video consultations with a Ukrainian endocrinologist and hormone therapy. However, Martirosyan reported that the [pilot project](#) came to a halt shortly after funding by the European Union and other organisations ran out.

When hate becomes political

On 7 June, the Right Side filed a complaint with the Human Rights Defender's Office and the Commission on TV and Radio of Armenia to remove a television show, which it [said](#) "intensifies public hatred towards transgender people".

In the third episode of the series, "*Hatucum. Korupcia 2*", ("Corruption 2. Retribution") a police chief calls trans people derogatory slurs such as "dregs", saying they deserved to be "thrown in jail" and "beaten", according to the [statement](#) by the Right Side.

But there is a wider political context. The series is broadcast by Yerkir Media, a television station affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). Opposition-led [protests](#) by the ARF and two parties of former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan have been taking place in Yerevan.

Demonstrators have been calling on Pashinyan to step down over his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, his ongoing peace negotiations with Azerbaijan and [opening the border with Turkey](#).

Martirosyan is wary of the unrest. “Right now it’s very dangerous because the [former] government is using LGBTIQ topics against Nikol Pashinyan’s government,” she said.

During the snap parliamentary elections in June 2021, one opposition MP told citizens not to participate in a rally organised by Pashinyan, saying doing so meant opposing the army and the church, and “supporting the LGBT community and traitors”, [according to a report by Pink Armenia, an LGBTIQ group in Yerevan](#).

For Martirosyan, the hardest part of her job as an activist is raising awareness and changing societal attitudes about trans people in Armenia.

Her activism was [rewarded](#) in The Netherlands last year by the Red Umbrella Fund, a global fund for sex workers, and by the Human Rights Tulip, with a prize of 100,000 euros. Martirosyan says she used the money to buy bigger office space for the Right Side in Yerevan.

“Maybe after ten or more years things will change,” she said. “We will continue to work even though it’s dangerous for us.”

Lucy Martirosyan

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