

‘You learn to hide your identity’: being queer in the Armenian army

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While military service is mandatory in Armenia, the prospect comes with many dangers for queer Armenians. Faced with a system that labels them mentally ill while both denying and mocking their existence, there appears to be no easy way through.

For Artak Adam, the threat of military service loomed heavy as they approached their 18th birthday.

Being queer, Artak knew what their options were: being labelled mentally ill on account of their identity and forcibly exempted, being subjected to discrimination and violence within the armed forces, or hiding their identity and living in fear of being outed.

‘I was exempted from the army as a person with a mental disorder’, Artak states, in the noisy cafe where we agreed to meet.

The 23-year-old queer activist is one of very few people who was willing to discuss the discrimination and violence that young queer Armenians face on their journey to military service, or the way to being exempted from it.

‘Personality disorder’

The lack of tolerance towards queer people in Armenia is nothing new. An ILGA-Europe report earlier this year [ranked](#) Armenia among the most homophobic countries in Europe, alongside Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. The report noted the lack of tolerance towards queer people, particularly in closed institutions like the army.

While violence and discrimination against queer people go widely unnoticed by the general public, for queer individuals and the wider community, the consequences can be severe.

Point 8 of a 2018 [decree](#) by the Ministry of Health exempts people with a ‘personality disorder’ from the two-year military service that is mandatory for all Armenian men over the age of 18. It is common knowledge that this label is frequently applied not to those with diagnosed personality disorders, but to queer people.

While acknowledging that the practice is wrong both legally and ethically, Armenian activists and human rights groups have not fought the rule, as exemption may be the only way to prevent queer young people from facing discrimination and violence in the army.

However, many want to join the army while concealing their identities; some want to serve their country, while others need the military passports held by current and former serving army members to pursue their chosen careers, for example in the public services or the police.

But what awaits them in the military is unclear: there are no publicly available statistics on the number of queer people serving in the army or exempted from the army based on their sexual orientation. Statistics about cases of violence and discrimination in the army, both against queer people and in general, are almost impossible to find, as the Defence Ministry keeps a wide range of information secret.

According to rumours that have neither been definitively proven nor formally dismissed, if queer conscripts come out during their mandatory military service, they are transferred to a separate military unit in Armenia for those considered 'other'.

However, these people and those who continue their service in other military units often decide not to speak out against the discrimination they face, so as to avoid scandal or further discrimination.

Luiza Vardanyan is a lawyer at Pink Armenia, a leading queer rights group.

Vardanyan says she has reason to believe the rumours of a 'queer brigade' in the Armenian army.

The lack of public information about the unit, and the number of soldiers serving in it, she says prevents human rights organisations from understanding more about the conditions and attitudes that queer people face in the army.

Vardanyan says that the cases they deal with are from two broad stages — conscription and in the army.

'The most common cases [during the conscription process] are discrimination by doctors', Vardanyan says. 'The conscripts are asked questions about their sexual life, orientation, and preferences'.

Cases of maltreatment of queer people are reported even from the psychiatric hospitals where conscripts go to secure army exemption.

'There were cases in which conscripts were asked to stay at the hospital overnight or [hospital staff] even tried to keep a person there forcefully', says Vardanyan. She adds that the psychiatric examination is verbal, making an overnight stay unjustified.

'In another case, a trans person approached the military commissariat to collect their military passport after serving as a man, despite identifying as a trans woman, but was rejected and bullied.'

'They were told the passport could not be given to them as the staff did not understand whether the person was a man or a woman.'

The issue was solved with Pink Armenia's intervention and an appeal to the Ministry of Defence. Vardanyan says the ministry is dealing with such cases based purely as human rights violations, without focusing on the gender perspective.

In one case, Pink Armenia appealed to a Yerevan court regarding violence against a queer person who faced discrimination based on their sexual identity while serving in the army.

The court dismissed the case, and in 2022 Pink Armenia appealed to the European Court of Human Rights.

In the absence of official data or public statements, the only way for both Pink Armenia and other human rights organisations to gain insight into the treatment of queer people in the army is when

victims of discrimination approach them for assistance.

Their attempts to help do not always succeed. Vardanyan says that in one case, a former soldier approached them about being sexually assaulted within the army during the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. They later broke off contact.

'They treat us like they'd treat a murderer'

Artak was born in a small town in eastern Armenia. They knew that undergoing mandatory medical examinations for the army in a small town 'where everyone knows everyone' was set to trigger scandal and abuse towards both Artak and their family, so decided to undergo the examinations in Yerevan.

Medical examinations of conscripts start a few years before the beginning of military service. Throughout this time, they are required to pass through a number of procedures aimed at revealing any issues that could potentially compromise their military service, including having a 'non-traditional' sexual orientation.

Artak says that their family was relatively supportive, which helped a lot.

'I have a paradoxical dad, though', says Artak, smiling. While he was occasionally violent against members of the family, Artak says they also had 'the best conversations' with him about their sexuality.

However, family issues and Artak's father's behaviour had severe psychological consequences, and they say they found it hard to communicate with 'traditional, patriarchal Armenian men'.

'I could not imagine how I was supposed to talk with the boys [in the army], how I was going to eat at the same table with them. I thought they would mock me... they would rape me', Artak says.

Artak says that such deeply-ingrained homophobia is also common in other institutions, like prisons.

'In closed institutions, being an LGBT person is not a question of orientation but a status', they say, adding that even slightly 'feminine' men become targets of discrimination.

Artak says they knew from the outset that they did not want to join the army; their manners, the way they spoke, or any details about their identity were liable to make them a victim of discrimination and violence.

They decided, at 18 years old, that their best tactic was to 'not look weak' in front of their potential harassers.

The decision worked, they say. According to the activist, their ties with Armenian NGOs and lawyers, and their 'threats' to make things public helped minimise the mockery and harassment they experienced.

'I even told the doctors I was going to open an NGO that would work specifically with conscripts and protect their rights', Artak says.

'I did [later]. But I don't know why I said it at the time', the activist said, smiling.

After Artak's lawyer got involved, staff at the commissariat became significantly more respectful.

'They started using the right terms with me, treating me well', Artak says. They say it is 'worth

mentioning', as it demonstrates that the institutions are capable of treating queer people well.

'But the problem is', the activist says, 'that they usually think of LGBTQ people as "second class" people. They treat us like they'd treat a murderer'.

Artak's experience of medical examination was free of physical violence, but did involve psychological mistreatment.

Refusing to talk with them behind closed doors, doctors forced the 18-year-old Artak to talk about their sexual identity while the door remained open, allowing other conscripts to look and listen in from the corridor.

'They probably thought they'd get infected if the door was closed', Artak says, only half joking.

Their story was not unique among queer conscripts.

A 2022 report by DiverCity, the queer and feminist civil society organisation that Artak had promised to create, recorded a number of cases in which queer conscripts were made fun of or forced to talk about their sex lives while others listened in, putting them at risk of abuse and bullying after leaving the examination room.

'I was asked if I was active or passive when having sex', one of the queer people interviewed by DiverCity said. 'I was instructed to get my hormones examined. [...] My mother forced me to undergo hormone therapy for about 8 months: I was injected with male hormones'.

The bullying against Artak continued on the final examination. The head of the commissariat made homophobic remarks about the colourful clothing Artak was wearing, accusing them of wearing such clothes as a 'deliberate provocation'.

'You learn to hide your identity'

'It was clear from the very first moment that you have lived your life in your own world for eighteen years, and now you are in a place where they treat you like an object', says Davit (not his real name) from Yerevan about his time in the army.

'And it's not just about me'.

While Davit hid his sexuality for the two years he spent in the army, he witnessed the responses that queer men faced when outed. He says the defining themes of his time in the army were fear and caution, as he had to hide everything that defined him: his voice, manners, and things he liked to talk about.

The reason was clear: if outed, his life would never be the same.

A queer soldier serving alongside Davit who was also trying to hide his identity was exposed by other soldiers shortly after his conscription.

'The next day, the whole unit was gathered to witness [his humiliation]. [...] The head of the unit called the soldier names, insulting and cursing him', Davit recalls. 'There were around 1,200 soldiers there'.

Shortly afterwards, he was discharged from the army after being sent to a psychiatric hospital.

'His life was split into two parts'.

Davit says it was unpleasant being in such an environment, especially in the period following the incident. 'It's like they wanted to show their dominance; masculinity'.

'You are afraid... It doesn't matter if that happened to you or someone else or what was the reason. The jokes, the bullying [...] It makes you feel terrible'.

'You learn to hide your identity. You learn to be more cautious and attentive'.

Davit, now 27, says it's not only in the army that he has had to hide his identity; Armenian society is not much more welcoming.

Not allowing queer men into the army is not a solution, Davit says, suggesting that the answer lies instead in changing mindsets and educating people.

'There are [queer] people who really want to serve in the army. They need to be given the chance.'

Ani Avetisyan was writing stories and photographing for four years before moving into the world of facts and numbers, first working as a data journalist, then as a fact-checker. Open-source investigations and data visualisation are her passions. Ani is interested in everything South Caucasus, politics, and 20th century world history.

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