Under the Digital Veil

STRUCTURAL INTERNET CENSORSHIP AND THE ISOLATION OF IRAN'S LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

HOMA (ALLIANCE FOR IRANIAN LGBTQI+ JUSTICE)

DECEMBER 2025

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Summary

This report examines the effects of internet censorship and website filtering in Iran on LGBTQI+ individuals. It focuses on how these restrictions reduce access to information on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Interviews with activists and an expert, along with documented evidence, show that blocked platforms, unsafe VPN dependence, reduced access to educational content, and dismantled online support networks have significantly deepened the isolation and vulnerability of LGBTQI+ communities.

Based on these findings, the report concludes that restricting internet access and blocking educational content in this sphere violates the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, education, and health. This conclusion is based on international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and General Comment No. 22.

These restrictions not only deepen the isolation of LGBTQI+ communities but also endanger lives by heightening psychological pressure and perpetuating state-sponsored hate speech. This underscores the urgent need by the international community to take concrete steps to reduce internet censorship and to support safe and reliable access to information for Iranian LGBTQI+ communities.

1. Introduction

Understanding gender identity and sexual orientation is an essential part of the rights to education and mental health. As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to respect the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information across borders. The systematic filtering of cyberspace in Iran, contrary to international law and standards, therefore constitutes a violation of this obligation[1] [2].

While internet filtering (state-imposed restrictions on access to specific websites and online services) deprives everyone of access to knowledge, for the members of the LGBTQI+ community, it can be a matter of survival. In the absence of public education on gender identity and sexual orientation, and in the face of state-sponsored incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, and hate speech[3] and the blocking of related online content, individuals, and LGBTQI+ adolescents in particular, are denied access to essential information needed for self-discovery and self-acceptance. This enforced isolation from information increases

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[1] UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Press Release: Iran – Government continues systematic repression and escalates surveillance to crush dissent*, 14 March 2025. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/iran-government-continues-systematic-repression-and-escalates-surveillance.

[2] Access Now & ARTICLE 19, *UPR Review: Access Now and ARTICLE 19 Highlight Threats to Digital Rights in Iran*, 30 April 2019, Available at: https://www.accessnow.org/upr-review-access-now-and-article-19-highlight-threats-to-digital-rights-in-iran

[3] ILGA World, State-Sponsored Homophobia Report 2020 (2020), Available at: https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report-2020

psychological distress and anxiety, which can in turn lead to depression and other mental health issues.

However, access to VPNs and high-speed internet in Iran depends largely on one's socio-economic status[4] and geographic location[5], since the structural development is asymmetrical. Many LGBTQI+ Iranians, therefore, face compounded levels of denial of access to life-saving information in relation to SOGIESC.

According to General Comment No. 22 on the right to sexual and reproductive health, issued under *Article 12* of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), reaffirms that all individuals and groups must enjoy equal access to health information, goods, and services without discrimination. It explicitly recognizes that this includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons, whose sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex status must be fully respected.

In Iran, discussions about access to online information and state censorship cannot be separated from the broader context of criminalisation and persecution of LGBTQI+ individuals. Same-sex sexual conduct and many forms of gender expression, including, for example, wearing clothes in public that do not conform to the gender assigned at birth, are criminalised and subject to punishments ranging from imprisonment and flogging, which constitute torture, to the death penalty[6]. For those assigned female at birth, the state's compulsory hijab regulations, further restrict bodily autonomy and freedom of expression.

International human rights law further clearly states that criminalising consensual adult same-sex relations or punishing the expression of gender identity constitutes a human rights violation. This report further emphasizes that denying access to essential information for this community also constitutes a violation of fundamental human rights.

2. Methodology

This report draws on a review of relevant legal and policy frameworks, as well as an analysis of data from international digital rights monitoring, domestic platform usage statistics, and governmental assessments. In addition, approximately ten informal interviews and further correspondence were conducted with Iranian LGBTQI+ activists, both inside Iran and within the diaspora, between August and November 2025.

Sources were selected to provide a balanced combination of quantitative and qualitative insights into the mechanisms of digital censorship and its consequences for the LGBTQI+ community in Iran. Given the severe restrictions on free expression and information, and the risks faced by LGBTQI+ individuals, no identifiable personal data was gathered, and the identities of interviewees remain confidential.

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[4] Asr Iran, "How many percent of low-income Iranian households have internet access?" 17 September 2023), Available at https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/924334/…

[5] Tabnak, "Decline in Internet Speed Despite Price Increases"18 January 2024, Available at https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1216590

[6] Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Discrimination and Violence Against Sexual Minorities*, 15 December 2010. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/15/iran-discrimination-and-violence-against-sexual-minorities

This report does not claim to offer a comprehensive mapping of all cases but aims to highlight structural patterns and state practices that restrict access to information and reinforce discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons in Iran.

3. Legal Framework and Institutional Mechanisms of Censorship

Prior to the expansion of online censorship, Iran had a long-standing record of restricting access to information through systematic censorship[7] of print and audiovisual media, including newspapers, books, and films. The same restrictive practices were later extended to the digital space, reflecting a consistent policy of controlling narratives about gender and sexuality.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's approach to online censorship has evolved alongside the expansion of internet access since the late 1990s. Early cases of content restriction pertaining to SOGIESc included the blocking[8] of blogs that addressed related issues on platforms such as *PersianBlog*, which was among the first Persian-language blogging services. These early actions marked the beginning of a broader state policy of controlling online expression that did not comply with state-sanctioned ideologies, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. These restrictions are consistent with the authorities' long-standing severe censorship as well as criminalisation of content, including in print and audiovisual format, that is deemed to contravene state-sanctioned ideologies.

The formal framework for filtering was institutionalized in 1998[9], when the Supreme Leader of Iran issued a directive titled *"General Policies on Computer Information Networks."* Since then, Iran's system of internet control has expanded through a combination of legal instruments and administrative bodies.

Today, the filtering of websites and applications operates through multiple authorities. Orders to restrict or block content are typically issued by the Judiciary, the Supreme National Security Council, or the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), and are implemented by internet service providers.

The Supreme Council of Cyberspace is a high-level state body composed of senior political, military, judicial, and security officials, including the President (as Chair), the head of the Judiciary, Speaker of Parliament, relevant ministers, and commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Law Enforcement Force (FARAJA). Its composition reflects its strategic role in controlling and regulating the country's digital sphere.

In 2009, following the adoption of the Computer Crimes Law[10], the Judiciary was required to establish the *Committee for Determining Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC)[11]*, chaired by

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[7]ARTICLE 19 (2013). *Living with State Censorship!*. Available at: https://www.article19.org/resources/living-state-censorship/
[8] Ghahraman, Saghi. "Protest of Gay Bloggers Against PersianBlog. Saghi Ghahraman Website (2017). Available at: https://saghi-ghahraman.org/اعتراض-وبلاگ%C2%80%E2نویسان-همجنسگرا-به-پرشن%C2%80%E2بلاگ/
[9] Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, General Policies on Computer Information Networks 3 October 1998, Available at https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=37674
[10] Computer Crimes Law (adopted 26 May 2009), Ekhtebar, Available athttps://www.ekhtebar.ir/?p=337
[11] Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), Who Filters the Internet, 27 January 2021, Available at https://www.isna.ir/xdHyvq

the Attorney General. Although legally composed of 12 members representing various ministries and state bodies, the group's functions are largely carried out by a smaller online committee that can unilaterally decide to block websites and platforms, bypassing the requirement for a majority vote. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology enforces these decisions by instructing service providers to implement restrictions.

In addition, following the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, significant changes also occurred within the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC). According to ARTICLE 19[12], the power and authority of the SCC and the National Cyberspace Centre have been steadily increasing since their establishment in 2012.

The organisation highlights several developments, including:

1. **New powers for the SCC, including:** The Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) has recently been granted new powers, including a new remit and priorities for the newly appointed secretary of the SCC, hardliner and former head of the student unit of the Basij volunteer militia group, Mohammad Amin Aghamiri. The appointment is instituted by the President and enforced by the Supreme Leader. The SCC has also gained new powers to control filtering through the government's Seventh Development Plan[13].

   New quasi-judicial powers, ushered in by a parliamentary ruling that makes policies and regulations ordered by the SCC enforceable without parliamentary or judicial oversight.

2. **SCC decree 'Reviewing Strategies to Increase the Share of Domestic Traffic and Counter VPNs'.** The decree pushes users towards domestic platforms, which are easier to place under SCC control, and the decree prohibits virtual private networks (VPNs).

Escalating Efforts to Criminalize Access to an Open Internet

Internet censorship in Iran has evolved from mere content filtering into a broader system of control targeting both users and the tools they rely on to access information. In addition to imposing severe restrictions on access to online information through filtering, authorities have increasingly taken measures to ban and criminalise the use of circumvention tools.

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[12] ARTICLE 19, Tightening the Net: Iran's new phase of digital repression, July 2024. Available at: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Supreme-Council-of-Cyberspace_final-3.pdf
[13] Iran's "Development Plans" (Barnameh-haye Towseh) are multi-year national policy frameworks prepared by the government and submitted by the President to the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) for approval. Once ratified by the Parliament and endorsed by the Guardian Council, they become legally binding and guide the country's economic, social, and cultural policies.

According to Article 6 of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace' "Resolution of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace on Countering Circumvention Tools (VPNs),"[14] adopted at its 96th session on 14 November, 2023, the use of VPNs or other filtering-circumvention tools is prohibited except where legally authorized.

Furthermore, under Paragraph (a) of Article 753 of the Islamic Penal Code[15] (Article 25 of the *Computer Crimes Law*), the production, distribution, or sale of software or tools intended for use in computer crimes, including filter-circumvention is criminalized.

State officials have also repeatedly highlighted the need for further online restrictions, including through public statements.

In parallel with these legislative and policy measures, senior state officials have repeatedly reinforced and justified online restrictions through public statements and sermons. Ahmad Alamolhoda[16], the Friday Prayer Imam of Mashhad and the Supreme Leader's representative in Khorasan Razavi province, stated in one of his recent speeches on 14 November 2025 regarding internet oversight: "Content production in cyberspace must not be left unrestricted; the spread of norm-breaking videos circulating online is worse than allowing thieves and murderers to roam freely in the country."

Earlier, Hashem Hosseini Bushehri[17], the Friday Prayer Imam of Qom, stated on 15 November 2024 in opposition to lifting internet filtering: "First, regulate the laws governing cyberspace and bring an end to its unchecked state, then move toward corrective measures. No one is preventing people's businesses, but this cyberspace, which serves as an undeclared war against the Revolution, Islam, our people, and the Axis of Resistance, must be dealt with appropriately."

According to reports[18], on 25 October 2025, the Committee for Reviewing the Lifting of Filtering, established a year earlier by order of President Masoud Pezeshkian within the National Cyberspace Centre, convened to discuss the unblocking of Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram. Ultimately, the committee voted against lifting the filtering of these platforms.

Only one day later, Fars News Agency[19] denied the report, adding that during the meeting, the heads of the executive and legislative branches emphasized that any decision regarding the lifting of filtering must be made based on a resolution of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace.

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[14] Resolution of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace on Countering Circumvention Tools (VPNs), adopted 14 November 2023, Ekhtebar, Available at https://www.ekhtebar.ir/?p=93090
[15] *Punishment of VPN and Anti-Filtering Software Sellers*, *Shargh Daily Network*, 4 January 2023, available at https://www.sharghdaily.com/fa/tiny/news-866238
[16] Eghtesad News, "Ahmad Alamolhoda's Explicit Opposition to Lifting Internet Filtering / 'Content Production in Cyberspace Must Not Be Left Unrestricted' / 'We Must Fight the Issue of Improper Hijab'", 14 November 2025, Available at https://www.eghtesadnews.com/fa/tiny/news-753928
[17] Asr-e Iran, "Qom Friday Prayer Leader Warns Against Lifting Internet Filtering: 'Cyberspace Is an Undeclared War Against Our Revolution and Our People'", 15 November 2024, Available at https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1013870
[18] Asr Iran, "Filter of Telegram, YouTube and Instagram Remained / Head of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace Stopped by the Same Council", 29 Oct 2025, Available at https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1108498/
[19] Asr Iran, Fars denies move to lift filtering, 30 October 2025. Available at: https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1108887/

4. External Analyses of Internet Censorship in Iran

Several international digital rights organizations[20], including ARTICLE 19 and Access Now, have documented how Iran's policies on online censorship and filtering systematically restrict access to information and undermine freedom of expression.

Complementing these qualitative assessments, Freedom House's data-driven analysis provides further evidence of Iran's extensive online restrictions. Freedom House has documented how governments censor and control digital spaces. The data relevant to this report covers the period from June 2023 to May 2024[21], identifying "Key Internet Controls" as restrictions inconsistent with international human rights standards. According to these findings, social media and communication tools are blocked in Iran.

Internet freedom in Iran remains highly restricted. Authorities have systematically made access to the global internet more difficult and costly, such as the SCC decree[22] 'Reviewing Strategies to Increase the Share of Domestic Traffic and Counter VPNs', which includes measures such as pushing users toward domestic platforms and prohibiting the use of VPNs. While promoting the use of a state-controlled domestic network that enables closer monitoring and content control.

This report also observes that Aparat, an Iranian alternative to YouTube, has become one of the country's most visited platforms, benefiting from cheaper domestic data tariffs. However, its content is tightly regulated under Iranian law, preventing the sharing or viewing of material that may be considered politically or socially sensitive. In the period 1 June, 2023 – 31 May, 2024, according to Freedom House[23], internet freedom remained highly restricted in Iran. In addition to the 30 to 40 percent increase in internet traffic prices, the authorities also implemented further measures aimed at pushing users toward domestic platforms. In September 2023, the Hijab and Chastity Bill was enacted, introducing a range of punishments for women who appear in public, both online and offline, without a hijab.

Furthermore, several online users were handed multiyear prison sentences, and several people received death sentences in connection with their online content[24]. Earlier two prisoners[25] who had been arrested for administering and participating in a Telegram channel were also executed.

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[20] See e.g. Access Now, *Iran: The block on Telegram is a blow to freedom of expression*, 2018, https://www.accessnow.org/iran-the-block-on-telegram-is-a-blow-to-freedom-of-expression/; ARTICLE 19, *Tightening the Net: Iran's New Phase of Internet Repression*, 2023.

[21] Freedom House, *"Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report"* (2024), Available at https://www.freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024

[22] (see Resolution of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace on Countering Circumvention Tools (VPNs), 2023)[14]

[23] Freedom House. *Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 country report*. 2024, Available at https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024

[24] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), *"Charged with 'Corruption on Earth'; Mahmoud Mehrabi Sentenced to Death"*, 5 May 2024. Available at: https://www.hra-news.org/2024/hranews/a-48362/

[25] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), "Death s*entence carried out for two prisoners convicted of blasphemy in Arak prison"*, 8 May 2023. Available at: https://www.hra-news.org/2023/hranews/a-40986/

According to a summer 2023 report by Yekta Net (an Iranian digital advertising and marketing platform)[26], the number of monthly views of Persian-language videos on Instagram sharply declined after the platform was blocked. This downward trend continued until November 2023, before a gradual increase was recorded; however, by the end of the year, engagement levels still had not returned to those seen before filtering.

The UK Home Office's Country Policy and Information Note on Social Media, Surveillance, and Sur Place Activities (April 2025), updated in October 2025[27], confirms that the Iranian authorities continue to block or filter most global platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, X, YouTube, and Telegram, while even previously accessible applications such as Instagram remain restricted.

These permanent restrictions are further intensified[28] during periods of protest or political unrest, when the authorities often impose near-total internet shutdowns, disrupt access to mobile networks, and expand online surveillance to suppress mobilisation and public communication.

These structural restrictions not only limit the public's access to information but also have a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, particularly LGBTQI+ individuals, whose safety and self-exploration depend on access to uncensored online spaces.

5. Consequences of Internet Censorship and Filtering

Content filtering, and even the blocking of entire applications, in Iran purposefully targets LGBTQI+-related material. Websites addressing SOGIESC are systematically filtered, preventing Iranian LGBTQI+ persons from accessing open information or exploring their identities safely. In practice, this means that young LGBTQI+ Iranians must overcome the high wall of censorship simply to obtain basic information about themselves.

Unsafe access to the internet and applications can have extremely serious consequences for users. When VPNs and other circumvention tools are insecure and lead to the identification of users or their communications, individuals risk arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, ill-treatment, and harsh punishment. This vulnerability is particularly severe in Iran, where laws and practices criminalise consensual same-sex conduct and many forms of gender expression.

As stated above, blocking global platforms like *YouTube*, which hosts open-access scientific and non-sectarian educational content, has deprived LGBTQI+ adolescents of vital learning opportunities. In contrast, state-sanctioned platforms such as *Aparat* have become arenas for disseminating anti-LGBTQI+ narratives, including videos that promote "conversion therapies". Such content reinforces stigma, legitimizes violence, and deepens the isolation of LGBTQI+

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[26] *Yektanet Annual Report: Two Out of Three Iranians Use VPNs*, *Zoomit*, 28 August 2023, Available at https://www.zoomit.ir/tech-iran/408469-yektanet-report-digital-marketing-1401-internet/

[27] UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note: Iran – Social Media, Surveillance and Sur-place Activities* (April 2025), Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-social-media-surveillance-and-sur-place-activities-iran-april-2025-accessible

[28] Access Now, *#KeepItOn 2023 Report: Internet Shutdowns — Trends, Causes, and Consequences*, May 2024. Available at: https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf

individuals in Iran. For example, those who promote hypnosis[29] and aversion therapy[30] as methods for what they call the treatment of homosexuality. (Aversion therapy[31] is a behavioural method that attempts to eliminate unwanted behaviours by pairing them with unpleasant stimuli, such as electric shock. Its use as a means to change sexual orientation is now considered outdated and unethical[32], and is no longer accepted in modern clinical practice.)

Limited Access to Support Networks

The lack of access to reliable information about SOGIESC, combined with the blocking of dating applications and even social media platforms such as X and Instagram, has made it increasingly difficult for LGBTQI+ individuals in Iran to find community or access resources on sexual education and human rights. In Iran, platforms commonly used among LGBTQI+ communities, such as Grindr and HER, are blocked and can only be accessed through circumvention tools. For many LGBTQI+ individuals, these apps serve not only as dating spaces but also as rare channels for building community and accessing emotional support.

A lesbian in her 30s from Tehran told Homa in September 2025: "The HER application is blocked in Iran, but because of the restrictions imposed by HER itself, it cannot be used even with a VPN. I even emailed them and explained the issue, but I never received a response."

A non-binary person in their 20s from Isfahan told Homa in September 2025,: "Using a VPN for practically any application has become exhausting. Even if I manage to connect to Telegram or Instagram, the other person faces the same problems. And VPNs slow down the connection. This also affects the quality of your calls." The filtering policies have disrupted the organic process through which LGBTQI+ individuals connect, share experiences, and develop mutual support systems.

Before it was blocked in Iran, Telegram functioned as a primary platform for communication, information exchange, and community-building among LGBTQI+ individuals. Numerous groups and channels actively shared educational, psychological, and awareness-raising materials that supported self-recognition and collective empowerment. These spaces played a significant role in informal activism and social connection.

"I need to connect to a VPN for almost everything I do online. Accessing LGBTQI+ content might not be impossible, but one of my main concerns is the security of the VPNs we use. Digital safety isn't just about enabling two-step verification; it's also about how we protect ourselves in this process," a male LGBTQI+ advocate in his 30s told Homa in October 2025.

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[29] Najafi Tavana, D. (n.d.). Homosexuality: causes and treatment [Video]. Aparat. Available at https://www.aparat.com/v/yjohmr8

[30] Raefi Pour, A. (n.d.). Causes of homosexuality and its treatment [Video]. Aparat. Available at https://www.aparat.com/v/i016rl6

[31] Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Aversion therapy.* Available at https://www.britannica.com/science/aversion-therapy

[32] APA. (2017). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.* Available at https://www.apa.org/ethics/code

However, with the expansion and institutionalization of internet filtering, most of community-based educational and peer-support initiatives have been dismantled or compelled to operate in secrecy.

"I use paid VPNs because the free ones are just too slow. LGBTQI+ groups and channels were badly affected when Telegram was blocked, and our activities dropped significantly. Even now, on Instagram, it's easier to follow others' content than to upload our own with such slow connections. I might still be able to access the open internet through these VPNs, but that's not the case for everyone," another lesbian LGBTQI+ rights activist in her 30s from Gilan Province told Homa in November 2025.

This means that LGBTQI+ individuals are not only forced to circumvent state censorship to access basic information, but they must also navigate the risks of insecure VPNs that may expose their identities or communication.

The origin[33] and management of many VPN services remain unclear, and it is often unknown who operates or organizes them. Those platforms that allow users to purchase accounts through domestic online payment gateways can pose additional risks, as they may collect users' personal data, such as names, addresses, or contact information, and expose them to potential surveillance or targeting.

This reflects how the filtering system not only limits access to information but also forces LGBTQI+ individuals to rely on insecure tools, thereby deepening digital inequality and heightening their vulnerability.

As a result, LGBTQI+ Iranians face increased isolation and vulnerability, lacking safe avenues for connection and self-expression. The growing difficulty of building support networks has not only limited community-based advocacy but also deepened the psychological and social impact of censorship on LGBTQI+ lives.

The mental health implications of restricted online access have also been observed by medical professionals in Iran. A psychiatrist, who requested anonymity for security reasons, told HOMA:

"Among LGBTQI+ adolescents, restricted access to online content increases isolation, which in turn elevates the risk of depressive and anxiety disorders. Limited access to reliable, safe content also exacerbates difficulties in identity formation. The more these adolescents can access safe and appropriate online spaces, the greater their chances of finding adequate social and psychological support."

6. Breach of International Obligations

By adopting and enforcing extensive internet filtering policies, the Islamic Republic of Iran in breach of its obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political

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[33] IranWire, "The Chaotic VPN Market: Which VPNs Are Safe and Which Are Not?", November 15, 2022, Available at https://iranwire.com/fa/features/109853

Rights (ICCPR) and Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These instruments oblige State Parties to respect, protect, and fulfil individuals' rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as well as the provisions pertaining to non-discrimination.

Iran's filtering regime violates these obligations in several concrete ways:

• **Violation of Article 19 ICCPR (freedom of expression and access to information):**
Iran blocks access to online resources related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual health. This prevents LGBTQI+ individuals from accessing life-saving information, exercising their right to seek and receive information, and participating in online spaces.
The criminalization of circumvention tools further obstructs access, creating an environment where even attempting to obtain information becomes punishable.

• **Violation of Article 12 ICESCR (right to health):**
Access to evidence-based sexuality education and mental health resources is an essential component of the right to health. Filtering removes these resources entirely, forcing LGBTQI+ people, especially adolescents, to rely on unsafe, incomplete, harmful or misleading sources.

According to CESCR General Comment No. 22 (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health, States must ensure access to comprehensive, evidence-based sexuality education. Iran's censorship directly prevents this obligation from being fulfilled.

As a result, the denial of sexuality-related educational content through internet filtering constitutes not only a violation of the right to health, but also undermines the realization of the right to education insofar as it restricts access to essential information required for personal development and well-being.

7. Alternative Resources and Digital Resistance

Although Iran's LGBTQI+ community has been affected by pervasive filtering, forms of resistance to secure open internet access through VPNs have undoubtedly continued. In the absence of large channels and activist information pages, smaller, dispersed LGBTQI+ groups, with varied aims such as dating, forming small social networks within the community, and even activism, have persisted.

Even if individuals and initiatives based outside Iran continue to produce content across multiple social networks, widespread filtering significantly restricts its reach within the country. While some users rely on circumvention tools, access remains unstable, fragmented, and insecure. Resistance can therefore only extend as far as the available channels allow, meaning that the community's capacity to build continuity, collective identity, and mutual support is systematically constrained.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

Homa's findings show that censorship and filtering in Iran function as structural digital violence that isolates LGBTQI+ communities and restricts their rights to information, education, and health.
A coordinated effort across governments, international mechanisms, technology actors, and civil society is essential to ensure safe, open, and rights-respecting access to information for LGBTQI+ persons in Iran.

Recommendations

To the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran

- Repeal all laws, including the Islamic Penal Code, that criminalize consensual same-sex conduct and subject them to the death penalty and punishments constituting torture and review and amend all vague provisions that could justify the arbitrary arrest, detention, or harassment of people due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

- Repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, vague and overbroad provisions in the Islamic Penal Code and other laws used to criminalize the exercise of human rights, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

- End all forms of online and offline speech legitimizing or inciting violence, hostility and discrimination against individuals on the ground of their gender, sexual orientation, gender, identity and gender expression.

- End undue restrictions on the digital sphere and stop the repression of online activities in violation of international law and standards and ensure that digital governance does not unlawfully restrict fundamental rights.

- Adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, gender identity, and gender expression, and sexual orientation, and establish effective mechanisms to identify and address such discrimination.

- Protect freedom of expression on the internet and ensure the privacy and security of online communications, in line with international human rights obligations.

To International Human Rights Mechanisms and UN Bodies

- Continue monitoring and reporting on violations of the rights of LGBTQI+ people in Iran, including Iran's digital repression and its impact on marginalized groups, including LGBTQI+ persons. Increase engagement with civil society organisations, including

LGBTQI+ groups inside and outside Iran, to support safe communication channels and digital security.

- Ensure that recommendations addressed to Iran's authorities in relation to the rights of LGBTQI+ people include issues of safe and free access to information, including online, and the lifting of all undue restrictions imposed on information pertaining to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

To UN Member States

- Use all opportunities to raise the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this report with Iran's authorities.

- Publicly condemn all forms of discrimination and violence against individuals in Iran on the ground of their gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

- Ensure that human rights violations against the LGBTQI+ people, including those pertaining to digital rights, are adequately addressed in documents focusing on the situation of human rights in Iran.

- Provide technical, financial, and capacity-building support to independent organisations and human rights defenders working to promote awareness, education, and advocacy on LGBTQI+ rights and the situation of LGBTQI+ persons in Iran, ensuring that such support is delivered in a manner that prioritises the safety and confidentiality of all those involved.

To Technology Companies and Internet Service Providers

- Facilitate access to an open and secure internet by supporting reliable circumvention tools and VPNs designed with the safety of LGBTQI+ users in mind.

- Engage meaningfully with organisations defending LGBTQI+ and digital rights in Iran and the wider MENA region throughout the development of policies and features, from design to implementation and enforcement, including on content moderation, privacy, and trust and safety strategies that prioritise the needs and concerns of LGBTQI+ users.

To International and Diaspora Civil Society Organisations

- Develop multilingual educational resources on sexual Orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), sexual health, and digital safety that remain accessible under censorship.

- Strengthen networks of Iranian LGBTQI+ communities inside Iran and in exile to support secure information-sharing and community resilience.

9. Homa's Outlook

Homa intends to continue this research by gathering more detailed and systematically collected field data on the experiences of LGBTQI+ users in Iran, and where feasible, aims to develop safer pathways to education and information through collaboration with international technical and legal bodies. This report constitutes a first step in documenting the effects of structural censorship on Iranian LGBTQI+ communities; it lays the foundation for future follow-up and articulates a formal call to international fora to reduce censorship.