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FIRST HAND

## **A long road travelled: Arab trans experiences of persecution and resettlement**

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*In Arab countries being transgender is considered a sin, a shame and is prohibited by governments. Many Arab transgender people are forced to flee to other safe countries, due to difficulties faced when attempting to achieve their true gender identity. In this article Dr. Mayan describes her experiences growing up as a transsexual in Yemen. She elaborates the new difficulties she faced as she fled to Malaysia, and her experiences of eventual resettlement to New Zealand through UNHCR. While Dr. Mayan now lives in safety, she is still unable to fulfill her dream of living as a woman, due to poor availability of sex reassignment surgery (SRS) surgeons in New Zealand. Dr. Mayan calls for UNHCR to pay greater attention to individual preferences – such as the need for available SRS surgeons – in the resettlement process. She also calls for long-term solutions to improve safety and acceptance for transgender people living in Arab countries, so that they no longer need to flee to third countries to live in safety.*

### **Struggles in Yemen**

I grew up in Yemen. My suffering began when I was six years old, when I began to feel like I was not like other boys. I began to realise that, while I had been born in a male body, my true gender identity was female.

My dream was simple: I wanted to live like the female that I felt I was. But in Arab culture a simple dream like this is considered shameful, is seen to go against religion and is prohibited by governments. My life became more and more difficult each year, and at the age of thirteen I finally told my parents about my desire to live as a girl. It was a big shock for my family, who had always seen me as a boy. They knew that it would be unacceptable in Arab culture for a boy to become a girl, so they convinced me to continue living as a boy.

Over time, due to lacking support from my family and society, and with no access to the internet or transsexual resources, I began to think of my female gender as a demonic obsession. There was little attention to trans issues in the media at that time. Like me, most transsexual people in society felt afraid to reveal their true gender identity, leading to feelings of increasing depression, desperation and isolation.

At the age of eighteen I discussed my gender identity with my family for a second time. Again, they rejected my true identity and told me to forget about it. Despite this, after a few more years I began to take some simple steps towards changing my gender. However, this caused tension between myself, my family and my community. Some people tried to convince me that my transition was unnatural and was going against God's wishes.

Alongside pressure from my family and community, I faced many other difficulties as I tried to start my gender transition.<sup>12</sup> In Arab countries there are few doctors who fully understand gender identity disorder. Further, it can be difficult to access proper medication or surgery, or to legally change one's gender on identity documents.

In addition, from the early 2000s Islamic extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda began to proliferate, killing men and boys who looked or dressed like women. These Islamic extremist groups created an extremely dangerous environment for Arab transgender people, and to this day continue to threaten and kill anyone suspected to be transgender.

With a heavy heart I decided to stop my transition for the time being, to stay safe while I remained in Yemen. However - with internet access growing in my country from the early 2000s - over time I started to learn more about gender identity disorder and made contact with transgender people across the world. Armed with new knowledge about my identity and about the possibilities open to transgender people worldwide, I decided on the next step of my journey; I decided to migrate to a safe new country to continue my transition.

### **More difficulties in Malaysia**

After two years of hard work in Yemen I obtained a scholarship to study in Malaysia, where I believed I could continue my journey in safety.

However, I found that, while Malaysia is a beautiful country with very kind people, unfortunately transsexuals are no more accepted there than in Yemen. I faced many obstacles, including government prohibition of sex reassignment surgery (SRS), a lack of doctors specialising in gender identity disorder, and insufficient access to necessary medication. I also faced new threats of persecution; in September 2014 Human Rights Watch reported that the Malaysian police were detaining transgender Muslims in states across Malaysia, for wearing clothes of the opposite gender in public.<sup>13</sup> As a foreign trans person in Malaysia life was twice as difficult for me; I also faced problems with identification, as I did not have the correct visa, nor did my passport match my real appearance.

Even though I once again faced barriers to achieving my dream, I decided to try to achieve some of my goals while I was in Malaysia; I completed a Masters degree and started studying for a PhD in Computer Science. When I began my PhD I started to think seriously about how I could continue my transition. During my PhD I was awarded substantial funding by my university in reward for my hard work. These funds helped me to access a psychologist and a hormone doctor. In January 2014 I applied to UNHCR in Malaysia for resettlement, hoping that UNHCR would resettle me to a third country where I could complete my transition in safety.

This was a difficult time for me, but I was determined to complete my transition and achieve my dream of living life under my true gender. UNHCR issued me with an identity card showing my female gender and with a photo showing my female appearance. However, as I had entered Malaysia as student, government officials, university staff and police officers

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<sup>12</sup> For more details of difficulties faced by transgender people in Arab countries see Dr. Mayan, "Arab Trans Suffering" (July 2015): <http://planettransgender.com/author/mayan/>

<sup>13</sup> See Human Rights Watch, "Malaysia: Transgender people under threat" (September 2014): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/24/malaysia-transgender-people-under-threat>

often would not accept the UNHCR card and would still ask to see my passport, leading to the same problems as before.

### **Resettlement to New Zealand**

After around a year and a half UNHCR resettled me to New Zealand. As soon as I landed in New Zealand I started to feel happier, more confident and stronger.

On arrival I spent a few weeks in a refugee centre, where I attended a special learning programme about life in New Zealand. The employees at the refugee centre were very kind and welcoming. They helped us with everything we needed to live comfortably once we left the centre. They arranged houses for us to live in, registered us for weekly government benefits, organised English classes for those who could not speak English, and provided us with medical screenings, psychological assessments and medication. They also helped us to take the New Zealand driving test, allowing us to obtain a driving license to use as ID.

When we refugees left the centre we were resettled to many different cities. The Red Cross caseworkers and volunteers were waiting at our new cities to drive us to our new homes. They assigned me two amazing female volunteers, who helped me a lot and treated me with true respect. The Red Cross volunteers were on hand to bring us food and household goods, and to tell us everything about our new cities.

Generally, I did not face many difficulties resettling to New Zealand, due to the support I got from the Red Cross. I found that the New Zealand people were friendly, welcoming and helpful. While I was still in the refugee centre some members of the New Zealand media visited the site, to interview refugees about their experiences. I think that this reflects the importance and respect with which the New Zealand government and people see refugees.

### **The long road continues**

In New Zealand, I found that transsexual people like me could live in safety and without discrimination, just like all other people.<sup>14</sup> However, while I felt safe and welcome in New Zealand, I soon found out that I would not be able to have sex reassignment surgery (SRS) in New Zealand; the country's only SRS surgeon retired in 2014 and has not yet been replaced.<sup>15</sup> In this respect my situation hasn't improved since leaving Yemen. In Yemen and Malaysia SRS was prohibited, but here in New Zealand it is permitted, but still impossible.

I see this huge disappointment as UNHCR's responsibility. When they interviewed me in New Zealand I asked to be resettled to a country where SRS would be available. However, they didn't pay attention to my preferences. Moreover, they should have told me before I travelled to New Zealand that I wouldn't be able to have the surgery there. If they had told me this I might have thought twice about resettling to New Zealand; I could have asked UNHCR to resettle me to a different country where I could easily have SRS performed.

### **Conclusions**

Most Arab transgender people today face very difficult lives. Adding to difficulties I experienced myself, in 2015 the Arab media mounted a campaign against transgender Arabs,

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see New Zealand Herald article, "Transgender refugee says NZ paradise" (August 2014): [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11316450](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11316450)

<sup>15</sup> See The Press article, "NZ's only sex change surgeon retires" (October 2014): <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/10664572/NZs-only-sex-change-surgeon-retires>

aiming to depict them as villains who exploit men for money.<sup>16</sup> This has caused increased hate and discrimination towards transgender people in Arab countries, creating new risks and security concerns.

For many Arab transgender people today, the only way to live safely is to move to another country to start a new life. However, this choice has become more and more difficult in recent years, as brutal wars have produced increasing numbers of Arab refugees looking to escape war and resettle to safe countries. In the long term, solutions are needed to create safe and accepting environments for transgender people in Arab countries - in particular, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria – so that they no longer need to flee their homes to achieve safety.

My experiences also helped me learn a lot about resettlement. From my experience, successful resettlement can be made possible only through hard work, determination and effective support from UNHCR. Now, living in New Zealand, I can live happily and in safety. However, I have not yet achieved my dream of changing my male sex to match my female gender by undergoing SRS surgery. While I thank UNHCR for helping me achieve safety, I call on UNHCR to pay greater attention to individual needs and preferences in the resettlement process - such as the need for available surgeons to perform SRS – in particular, when allocating cases to countries for resettlement.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank UNHCR for opening the door for me to achieve safety in a new country. I would like to thank the New Zealand government for accepting my case and giving me the chance to live a new life in New Zealand. I would also like to thank my assigned Red Cross social worker and volunteers for their help and support. In addition, I would like to thank those in Malaysia who gave me the opportunity to complete my higher education and to continue my transition. Finally, I would like to thank all others who have supported me on my long road towards reaching my dream.

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<sup>16</sup> For more details of recent media campaigns against Arab trans individuals, see Dr. Mayan, “Transsexuals in the Arab Media” (June 2015): <http://planettransgender.com/author/mayan/>