

Considering Transgender in Iran: The Contribution of Zara Saeidzadeh

Saeidzadeh, Zara. 2020. *Trans and Sex Change in Contemporary Iran: A Socio-Legal Study of Gendered Policies and Practices*. PhD diss. Örebro University: Centre for Feminist Social Studies. (159 pages)

ZARA SAEIDZADEH'S DOCTORAL thesis is an original qualitative study investigating the socio-legal status of trans (transgender) people undergoing gender affirmation surgery in contemporary Iran. It aims to contribute to the development of feminist theory about gender in Iran, by exploring the complexities of the process which is required for changing someone's legal gender in the person's official documents, focusing on socio-legal practices and lived experiences. The thesis addresses the social practices of gender at individual, meso, and macro levels. It takes a critical realist approach, drawing on Judith Butler's understanding of sex as constructed, Nancy Fraser's concepts of mis/recognition, and Raewyn Connell's notions of gendered practices. Saeidzadeh conducts interviews with transgender people and transgender activists and advocates, and documentary analysis of, e.g. Islamic Jurists' fatwas (legal opinions) on "sex change". During the course of the project the research became dangerous for her; after Dr Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian-Canadian researcher, was arrested in Iran, Zara Saeidzadeh decided to do the final interviews via telephone.

The thesis is located carefully within the existing trans scholarship, including works by Iranian scholars (e.g. Shakerifar 2011). It consists of four journal papers (see references below) plus a commentary, and it is grounded in a historical analysis of gender diversity in Iran. Saeidzadeh explains the ways in which, from the 1960s to 1979, gender affirmation surgeries (albeit based on medical pathologisation) were allowed from a secular perspective. She explains the impact of Islamisation in Iran, since the revolution in 1979, and the concurrent decimation of equality policies. The current process which is required for changing someone's legal gender in the person's official documents relies on pathologisation, a Real Life Test and court-issued certification, following a fatwa by the first supreme leader after the revolution in 1979, which is based on the obligation to undertake gender affirmation surgeries.

This thesis is original in a number of ways. Saeidzadeh challenges the widely held view that homosexuals in Iran are pushed to undertake gender affirmation surgeries; a view that overall finds no support in her research. She usefully challenges the hegemonic application of Western notions of sex and gender, problematising the Western tendency to homogenise Muslim nations, and Islamophobic assumptions about the process which is required for changing someone's legal gender in the person's official documents in Iran. Saeidzadeh helps to decolonise the field of transgender studies, which to date has been largely dominated by Western-focused contributions (see e.g. Monro 2005, 2019). Drawing on feminist research methods, she attends to the complexities and diversities of trans lives in Iran. Specifically, she finds that a lack of legislation, plus the plurality of fatwas, have led to medical and legal professionals making arbitrary decisions about having gender affirmation surgeries. Medical frameworks are deployed by Iranian trans people, using discourses of need rather than human rights, to negotiate a liveable life. They face challenges as a result of transphobia and heteronormativity – sometimes in the form of imported transphobic views influenced by Western (so-called) feminists such as Janice Raymond, that are held by some Iranian feminists.

While the thesis is generally an excellent contribution to sex and gender studies, one point to be questioned is Saeidzadeh's use of terminology. She uses the term "sex change" to refer to the "medical body modifications" and "gender" to address the "legal change". However, some Iranian trans individuals find the term "sex change" [*taghiri jinsiyat* in Persian] offensive and were therefore at the time Saeidzadeh was conducting her research advocating the use of other terms, such as "gender confirmation" [*tatbigh-e-jinsiyat* in Persian].

Another issue to be considered is that Saeidzadeh does not attempt to represent all Iranian trans people in her work. Her research focuses only on Iran-based heterosexual trans women and men, with binary gender identities, who have undergone or want to undergo gender affirmation surgery. However, there are other groups of trans people whose sexual orientations and gender identities are not legally accepted or represented in media or academic studies in Iran. Members of these groups do however tend to talk openly about their trans identities on social media, and they include:

1. Feminist heterosexual trans women and men who challenge gender norms, regardless of their interest or lack of interest in undergoing a gender affirmation process;
2. Non-heterosexual trans women and men;
3. Non-binary and queer trans individuals who may have taken hormones for a while or undergone some surgeries, or who may not have considered the medical transition process at all.

Although there are still many individuals from each of these three groups living in Iran, they tend to feel more pressured to flee Iran in any way they can, either as immigrants or refugees, than Saeidzadeh's research contributors. As a result, their narratives are often more represented in non-Persian media and in human rights reports and academic research (see Saeidzadeh 2020, 22, 67). They are also more likely to question or regret their past experiences of undergoing gender affirmation surgeries or taking hormones. That can be one of the reasons why studies based on

interviews with individuals from these groups conducted outside Iran more often tend to claim that gender affirmation surgeries are imposed on sex and gender minority groups in Iran than studies based on interviews with trans binary heterosexual individuals conducted inside Iran. It is important to point out that while some trans men and women do have a level of agency in choosing gender affirmation surgeries in Iran, for some non-heterosexual, non-binary and queer individuals, undergoing – or pretending to undergo – a gender affirmation process can be a survival strategy. We therefore hope that more research on transgender people in Iran, encompassing the many diversities that exist, will be possible, whilst we recognise that undertaking such research can be very challenging. More broadly, we welcome the contributions that Saeidzadeh is making, including a timely new paper, with Sofia Strid (Saeidzadeh and Strid 2020).

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