

*A Celebration of Courage: The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) Human Rights Awards*

Remarks delivered by Dr. Binnaz Toprak, OUTSPOKEN Honoree

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It is an honor for me to receive this prestigious award. I especially like its title. It reminded me of my high school teacher who addressed me as ‘lawyer’ because I would protest whenever she was unjust, such as the time when she asked an overweight friend to stand up on one foot in front of the class. Although I too got punished for my outspokenness by receiving a lesser grade than what I deserved, in the end justice prevailed and the school gave me a ‘Good Citizenship Award’ in my senior year.

However, few stories have such a happy ending. In countries like mine where freedom of speech is guaranteed in constitutions but often violated by governments, being an outspoken person comes with a price. The prices I have paid have been inconsequential, at the most campaigns against me in the media such as a recent smear by a religious newspaper which denounced me as someone who defends ‘the freaks’, referring to my legislative proposal for establishing a committee of inquiry into LGBT rights. Many others, both in Turkey and elsewhere, have paid for their outspokenness by being imprisoned or even tortured.

Turkish prisons have hosted, and continue to do so, large number of journalists, academics, or human rights activists whose ‘crime’ has been to speak up their minds. After all, this is a country where, as the current Prime Minister said, ‘books can be more dangerous than weapons.’ Turkish prosecutors seem to agree with him. I could site outrageous examples to back this statement: A journalist friend being tried for 32 years of imprisonment for a book he wrote on the assassination of a prominent intellectual as compared to the 20 for the murderer; or a trial I followed last year of 26 university students, who had already spent 6 months in prison, being tried for 48 years of imprisonment for protesting the prime minister and other government dignitaries when the latter visited their campus.

In 2008 while I was still in academia, I did a study in several Anatolian cities of people whose ethnic/religious identities or life styles were different from the Turkish/Sunni Muslim majority. The book that came out of this study shows that having a different identity in Turkey means social harassment, ostracism, abuse, and governmental discrimination. It did not cover LGBT individuals because we could not locate them in these small towns. However, stories of male students who had long hair or wore earrings or colorful t-shirts were telling: They were often ridiculed in public for being ‘effeminate’, or even beaten up. Indeed, my earlier studies as well as studies done by others have shown that LGBT individuals are the number one ‘unwanted’ citizens of Turkey, with majorities over 90 per cent who do not want them as ‘neighbors.’

Violations of their human rights include police harassment and violence, threats on life, murders by family members, reductions of sentences for such murders, attempts at lynching, attacks, reluctance to get medical treatment when attacked for fear of reports to the police, mobbing at work places, loss of jobs, inability to find employment and the consequent push into earning means of livelihood as sex workers, difficulty in finding housing, social ostracism and ridicule. Many are repeatedly charged large sums of money for allegedly having violated the Law of Misdemeanors. I personally listened to the story of a gay student in Istanbul who was taken to

police headquarters while walking on the street, asked to lower his pants, and charged for indecent behavior because of his underwear.

The present conservative government views LGBT rights as an issue of public morality, a term which is so vague as to defy definition but unfortunately figures in legal documents in Turkey, including the constitution. Proposals to include sexual identity and expression in the new draft constitution were turned down by members of the government party. So were the two proposals submitted to parliament to introduce hate crime legislation. The government is so finicky about the subject that last year, during the discussion of a bill to prevent violence against women, when I proposed that the bill should also cover LGBT individuals, the government's response was not only to reject it but to take the word 'gender' out of it lest it connote sexual identity and expression.

Given this picture, I find the role of international organizations such as IGLHRC to be extremely important in giving support to, and solidarity with, local organizations who continue in their struggle for LGBT rights. I would especially like to mention Kaos GL, Pembe Hayat, SPOD, and LISTAG in Turkey, whose work has not only helped LGBT individuals to have better lives but has also helped raise public awareness and empathy to the plight of those with a different sexual identity.

Let me end by thanking the selection committee, and especially the Executive Director of IGLHRC, Jessica Stern, for this award which I accept with great pride. I would also like to thank Hossein Alizadeh and Andreas Schwartz for meticulously taking care of the details of my trip. And my special thanks go to my parliamentary advisor, Erhan Ersoz, who has helped me to prepare the legislative proposal and to my 58 party colleagues in parliament who signed it. Thank you all.