



Iran Sex Changes Get Mullahs' Money as Regime Persecutes Gays

By Ladane Nasser



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Feb. 6 (Bloomberg) -- Nasser didn't think much of Iran's Islamic regime -- until it paid for him to become a woman.

Growing up in the city of Mashhad, Nasser knew he was different from the other boys, sneaking around in his aunt's skirts and experimenting with makeup. At age 14, he told his parents he wanted to have a sex change.

"I realized that I had a problem and that I needed to solve it through an operation," Nasser, now 18, says at a downtown Tehran clinic two days after he became a she called Hasti. "Even if lots of negative things are said about the regime, they also do things that are good."

In Iran, where men and women are segregated, and homosexuality is punishable by death, the government plans to spend 6 billion rials (\$647,000) this year to help pay for sex-change operations. The policies aren't as contradictory as they seem, because in traditional societies there is more pressure to conform to standard gender roles, says Mahdis Kamkar, a Tehran psychologist who works with transsexuals.

"In closed cultures, a transsexual will be encouraged to clarify things, starting from his or her appearance," Kamkar says. "Dressing up or behaving as the other sex is not satisfying enough."

Hasti grew up in a religious family, shocking her parents by letting her curly hair grow, wearing tight pants and makeup.

At 14, she was expelled from an all-boys school in **Mashhad**, a city of 2 million in northeastern Iran, because her looks and behavior were deemed "immoral."

'Let Him Remain a Boy'

An article in a local magazine prompted Hasti to learn more about transsexuals. Then, like many Iranians seeking answers about issues not discussed at home, she turned to the Internet.

"Before that I thought I'm a homosexual, but fortunately I got more information and realized it wasn't the case," she says.

Hasti's transformation took four years. She worked at her uncle's clothing shop and then a candle factory to save money for the operation. At 15, she began 14 months of medical examinations and psychoanalysis to make sure she qualified for a sex change.

In May 2007, a panel of doctors gave Hasti permission for the surgery.

"It was very difficult," says Mahsoumeh, Hasti's mother, who like her new daughter spoke on condition their family name not be disclosed. "I would go pray all night: 'God, please don't let this happen, let him remain a boy.'"

Hasti, though, had made up her mind.

She applied to Iran's State Welfare Organization for financial assistance, and in November the agency agreed to pay 35 million rials toward the surgery.

Wearing a Chador

Hasti's parents finally agreed after her father set one condition: she must wear the chador, a full Islamic cover worn by women from traditional families.

"Before, when she went out and put makeup on, I suffered a lot because I thought people would look at her in a bad way," says Mahsoumeh, who also wears the chador.

Hasti's surgery, which involved removing the male genitals and creating a vagina from a section of intestine, lasted nine hours. Her doctor, Bahram Mir Jalali, is one of about 10 sex-change surgeons in Iran. He says he has performed more than 460 operations during the past 12 years.

Iran authorized such operations in 1984 under a decree issued by the **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini**. The

government considers transsexuals to be people who are "trapped" in a body of the wrong sex, says Mohammad Mehdi Kariminia, a cleric who wrote a thesis on the rights and duties of transsexuals.

"It's extremely enlightened thinking, and it's most welcome," says Bernard Reed, who founded the Gender Identity Research and Education Society in Surrey, England, which promotes transgender issues in the U.K. "Would you see President Bush or **Tony Blair** making such a statement?"

'Not to Blame'

Iran's State Welfare Organization is processing 116 applications for financial aid.

Transsexuals "are not to blame," says Hassan Moussavi Chalak, head of the agency's office of social injuries. "They have rights such as every other citizen."

By contrast, the Koran condemns homosexuality as a "moral deviation," Kariminia says. President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, who revived the so-called moral police to enforce Islamic laws, denied gays even existed in Iran during a speech last year at Columbia University in New York.

Hasti says she was arrested several times when, as Nasser, she walked down the street in tight jeans.

Now she wears the chador as a sign of her femininity, what she calls "a girl thing."

"I prefer going out with the chador in the heat of the summer rather than being considered a homosexual," Hasti says as she examines her nails. "I've liberated myself from society, from people's perception of me."

Hasti is now planning for her new life as a woman.

"I'm totally ready mentally for marriage," she says. "They call us, transsexuals, women to the power of 1,000, in the pleasure we get from taking care of a husband or of the house."

She raises the white sheet covering her naked lower body to glance down at her metamorphosis. "I was born the day before yesterday," she says, smiling.

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