

Transgender in Tajikistan

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Gender reassignment surgery is a rarity, and social prejudice deters transgender people from going public.

In January this year, 21-year-old Sandra underwent gender reassignment surgery in Tajikistan. Now she is bracing herself for the struggle to change her identity papers and make her identity official.

“I need to change my documents including my birth certificate and passport, and I know that’s going to be difficult and take time,” she said.

Sandra is one of 14 openly transgender people in Tajikistan, according to figures provided by NGOs. The real number is likely to be higher as people are afraid to reveal their identities. Her gender reassignment surgery is only the second known operation of its kind in the country.

Sandra is the first person to speak publicly about the process. She told IWPR her primary reason for doing so was a desire to push for a change in attitudes. Getting her documentation altered is part of that process.

According to Ravshan Abdullaev, head of the Eurasia Foundation in Tajikistan, transgender people “face a lot of problems like stigma and discrimination, and in addition, there is no mechanism for replacing identification documents”.

Abdullaev says that in the popular imagination, members of sexual minorities are confused with paedophiles. At the same time, he says, “while publicly condemning them, many people will privately admit that they don’t have a problem with them”.

The United States-based Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights and Equal Opportunities highlighted the issue of documentation in a 2013 report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

“Transgender people living in Tajikistan do not have access to the medical procedures they may require,” the report read. “This being the case, they must travel abroad to obtain treatment. The state, however, does not recognise the individual’s gender identity, which makes obtaining a passport reflecting a transgender person’s gender impossible. At border crossings and in any other situations requiring state documentation, transgender people are therefore vulnerable to humiliating invasions of privacy and other forms of abuses.”

The Heartland Alliance report gave the example of an individual from Tajikistan woman who was subjected to strip searches each time she travelled to Moscow for gender reassignment surgery and post-operative treatment. Officials said they suspected she might be carrying drugs.

The report urged the UN to press the Tajik government to introduce legal methods for changing one’s gender identity on state documents.

Under existing Tajik law, transgender people can change their passports if they provide a medical document stating that they have undergone gender reassignment surgery. This automatically excludes those who have not had surgery, and in practice, the lack of an established procedure for changing one’s gender in a passport, coupled with corruption, bureaucracy and downright ignorance of the law, means that the process is not an easy one.

Many European states have similar discrepancies. According to a February 2014 report by Amnesty international, most of these countries – Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, Belgium and Germany among them – have gender-recognition regulations that require compulsory psychiatric diagnosis and medical evidence. In Ireland, transgender people cannot obtain legal recognition of their gender. See **[Georgian Laws Discriminate on Transgender Rights](#)** for the situation in another post-Soviet state.

An official from a Dushanbe district registry office, who asked to remain anonymous, said she had never even heard of the issue of getting a new passport on the basis of gender identity.

“The legislation lists rules for changing a passport or birth certificate, but it doesn’t say anything about changing identification documents if someone wants to change [their documented] gender,” she said.

With support from human rights activists, Sandra has managed to collect the necessary documents but is yet to submit them. She was told that first of all, her birth certificate would have to be replaced, after

which she would be able to apply for a new passport.

The only known case in Tajikistan where a passport was issued following gender reassignment was in 2001, when a woman who underwent surgery to become a man received new documents. But the case was given little publicity so it has not set a legal precedent.

Karim Artikov, the surgeon who performed the 2001 surgery as well as Sandra's procedure, told IWPR that the new passport took about one month to process.

"We sent a letter signed by the hospital's management to the justice ministry which, in turn, passed it to the central agency responsible for the registry offices," Dr. Artikov said.

He said his first patient then left Tajikistan to live in another country.

Dr. Artikov said Sandra approached him and begged for help as she felt she was living in the wrong body. After two months' evaluation, doctors decided that the operation was essential.

"She had made up her mind about a sex change operation and we decided to go ahead with surgery," continued Artikov, who performed the operation free of charge.

Throughout her life, Sandra has encountered levels of discrimination and abuse that drove her to close to suicide, as she told IWPR.

Born Alexander, Sandra grew up in and out of children's homes as her teenage mother struggled to bring her up on her own after her father left.

She recalls relentless taunting and mistreatment because she was different.

"I never liked boy's clothes but I was constantly told off and forced to put them on," Sandra said, recalling rare moments of joy during visits to her grandmother's house when she secretly played with her granny's silver brocade shoes.

Her mother died when Sandra was 14 and she became estranged from her grandmother, the only relative with whom she was in contact.

After she left her last children's home, Sandra went to Russia and enrolled on a college course in the city of Voronezh to become a landscape designer. But the discrimination and humiliation continued there, so she returned to Tajikistan, where she was unable to find a permanent job.

Some employers did not approve of her desire to express a sexual identity different from the gender stated in her passport, while others made advances to her.

While struggling to find a job, she came into contact with rights activists and at one point was involved in an UN-supported project supporting LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights. But when the funding came to an end, she was again left without an income. That is how she ended up working as an exotic dancer in a night bar, the job to which she returned after the surgery.

Sandra says she tries to stay strong but fears she is falling into depression, overwhelmed by the reactions of people who treat her as a freak.

Even before her openness about her surgery put her in the media spotlight, just leaving her apartment to go to work was a daily ordeal. She describes relentless abuse, neighbours calling her names, and children who threw stones at her.

Since she gained a media profile, the situation has worsened, and Sandra has been forced to move home. Due to the abuse she received via mobile phone, she has changed her SIM card three times.

The harassment continues at work. "Police officers in expensive cars who frequent the bar where I work stare at me," Sandra said.

She says she is paying a high price for going public with her story, but wants to remain in Tajikistan to support others like her, and is in close contact with several transgender people who she hopes will be inspired by her experience.

"Like me, they are ostracised, but I have decided to fight all the way for the right to be the person I feel I am," she said. "My friends are waiting to see whether I succeed or not."

Lidia Isamova is an IWPR contributor in Tajikistan.

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