

Lilit Martirosyan made a speech at the annual seminar organized by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

Dear distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is a great honor for me to be with you today and speak here as a Transgender rights defender and Transgender activist from Armenia.

I am Lilit Martirosyan, the Founder and President of the “Right Side” Human Rights Defender NGO in Armenia.

This day we have the opportunity to reflect on the causes of the hardships faced by the LGBTIQ community and the hard road ahead, consider our abilities to promote gender equality and human rights in our society.

The empowerment of LGBTIQ people is a great responsibility for me and for each of us, as we truly need it. Imagine, how much we could achieve with LGBTIQ people's equal participation in all aspects of life, because we are all a part of this society, just because human rights connect us to each other through a shared set of responsibilities. By working together on an equal footing and on the same purpose, we can foster democratic culture, we can put an end to inequality.

For many years, having faced stigma, discrimination, violence and attacks by transphobic people in Armenia, we as a team have been striving to achieve accountability, justice and acceptance. But our road is very tough: Trans LGBTIQ people are excluded from life; we are getting calls for help nearly every day. In this situation, it is very difficult for the community to come out, be visible, express themselves, be socially included, or fight for their rights.

From 2017 till 2021, Right Side NGO documented 976 cases of violation of trans people rights in Armenia. Transgender people have been subjected to physical violence and persecution, there are cases when people cut the throat of transgender people, violently beaten them in their own apartment, burned the apartments and personal belongings, humiliated and mocked in public. Transphobia, as an irrational fear and hostility towards trans people or those who “violate the so called traditional gender norms”, can be seen as one of the main causes of violence and intolerance faced by trans people. Unlike many other countries, Armenia does not have separate statistics on hate crimes, speeches or violence against Trans LGBTIQ people and does not take any special measures to address these cases. On the contrary, Armenian bureaucratic culture more often suggests a formal creation of an idyllic situation in which the absence of various kinds of problems is desirable, and their presence, on the contrary, only hinders, creates a negative image of the police or even the country as a whole. To date, the Organization has participated in 52 lawsuits, 12 of which are still pending. In addition, as of 2020 Right Side has already submitted a case to the European Court of Human Rights.

Since my childhood I have also been facing threats, harassment, psychological and physical violence, because I am a Transgender woman. I left my home when I was 14 by being forced to live in the streets, being a teenager, I endured transphobia, starved a lot and never spoke up. Growing up, I have decided to be the voice for my community, for my voiceless sisters and brothers, give them a helping hand as much as possible and to stand for their rights.

My hope, instead, is that my LGBTIQ people, young members of the community in particular, feel inspired and motivated to join our efforts to improve this situation: to join the 'trans women

are women' and 'LGBTIQ people's rights are human rights' fight, to be brave enough to change the agenda.

I don't want to say that it is easy. It is tough enough to deed. Sometimes, while going to crowded places I also have to cover my face in order not to be noticed, because here, my society don't want to see me. COVID-19 pandemic is a disaster for all the nations, but I should claim that it saves a lot of transgender people who take the opportunity to cover under masks; I wish we didn't have to.

Today, I want to call upon all of us to join our competences for eradicating the roots of transphobia and homophobia, for promoting harmony and peace.

In Armenia, bias-motivated violence based on gender identity frequently goes unreported, remain without proper investigation and retribution especially because there is a lack of legal framework related to hate crimes and hate speech. There is a lack of laws preventing gender-based discrimination, hate crimes and hate speech against LGBTIQ people, gender reassignment surgery and hormone replacement therapy are not legally regulated, which leads to the complex of legal, medical and health problems. All these issues must be addressed, and can be addressed only through our cooperation; that is why I am striving despite everything. I want to enhance an LGBTIQ-inclusive social-cultural and political environment in Armenia and in our region.

We should all begin from somewhere by throwing a light on equality and diversity. The world needs a comprehensive response to the problem of transphobia and homophobia; one that will ensure that there is accountability.

I strongly believe that everything starts with one-step, we can bring this change by ending the culture that normalizes the abuse of LGBTIQ people, mistreatment and discrimination against them.

Yes, we live in different countries and sometimes, our path can be dangerous, but we are supposed to come together in defense of something greater than ourselves.

Thank you very much.