

## **Lamia's Story**

My name is Lamiaa Boukoumjih, and I was born in Casablanca, Morocco. In Morocco, every gay person is forced to lead a double life in order to survive the homophobic reality. The legal and religious prejudice against gay individuals in the country is significant.

Legally, Article 489 of Morocco's legal code criminalizes homosexuality, labeling it as an "indecent act or act against nature." Engaging in same-sex relationships can result in up to three years of imprisonment. This legal barrier creates a hostile environment where gay people face the risk of losing their jobs, being ostracized by their families, and experiencing other social repercussions. The prospect of arrest alone is enough to discourage individuals from revealing their sexuality.

Religious prejudice against homosexuality stems from condemnations found in the Quran and hadiths, the sayings of the prophet Mohammed. The absence of an official term to describe gay people in the Arabic language and the Arab world has led to the use of slurs derived from religious texts. These derogatory terms are commonly employed by the general public and the media when discussing homosexuality.

Growing up, I witnessed the discriminatory teachings in the education system, where stories like that of Lot were used to portray homosexuality as a punishable offense. Hadiths, such as those found in the Abu-Dawud book, advocate severe punishments for homosexuality, including death. These teachings contribute to both religious and societal prejudices that persist from an early age.

Due to these circumstances, I have been living a life of secrecy and fear. Coming out to my parents was never an option, as I didn't want to jeopardize their safety or force them to choose between me and their reputation. I love my parents dearly, and their well-being has always been my priority. The risks associated with being open about my sexuality in Morocco are too great. In 2012, at the age of 21, I met my ex-wife, an American Moroccan, who had moved back to Morocco with her family. We had to keep our relationship hidden, meeting secretly and avoiding any public displays of affection. Despite the challenges, we fell in love and dreamed of a future together. However, the reality of Morocco made it clear that there was no place for a lesbian family like ours in the country.

In 2015, my ex-wife returned to the United States to follow her brother's path, and I enrolled in an English school in Miami. Living in the U.S. was a liberating experience, finally allowing me to be myself without fear. The freedom to express our love openly was a tremendous relief. However, when we visited Morocco in 2015, my ex-wife decided to come out to her parents without consulting me. This decision led to a nightmare scenario. Her family reacted with anger and hatred towards me, and they threatened to call the police, immigration authorities, and expose us publicly. The situation became dangerous, and we had to act swiftly. I left for the U.S. the next day, leaving my family behind, unaware of the truth. My ex-wife ran away from home, escaping with only the clothes on her back and minimal money. We reunited in the U.S., but the damage had been done. The exposure had severed ties with our families and put our lives at risk.

In the U.S., we felt safe and free, but the struggles continued. I encountered financial difficulties as my father refused to support my college education. Nevertheless, we persevered and tried to build a life together. However, the ongoing drama and pressure from her family ultimately led to the dissolution of our marriage in 2019.

Despite the challenges, I remain hopeful for a better future. In 2021, I remarried, this time to Neta, a Jewish Israeli woman. Our connection was instant and profound, even though our respective backgrounds had a history of conflict. We long for a safe place to build our family, but returning to either Morocco or Israel is not an option due to the dangers we would face. Recent news articles have further alarmed me, with stories of LGBTQ+ individuals in Morocco being publicly humiliated and their lives ruined by the authorities. The very institutions meant to protect citizens are responsible for violating their basic human rights.

My wife and I are currently in the process of seeking approval from immigration to secure our safety. We are not seeking financial assistance but rather support from LGBTQ+ organizations and political leaders. We hope to share our story to raise awareness of our situation and find allies who can help ensure our safety here in the U.S.

Our dream is simple: to live a normal life without fear, to be able to work and share our orientation openly, to be judged based on our qualities rather than our sexual choices. We long to have children who can grow up without feeling like outcasts or being endangered by society's prejudices. The exposure and support from the right people can make all the difference in keeping us safe and allowing us to live freely in the United States.