



Iranian Women's Struggle to Resist Repression The Years of Hardship and Violence

The past few years have been the most eventful in the 44-year lifespan of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Even before the nationwide protests that followed the death in custody of Mahsa Jina Amini, who was arrested for improper hijab, the country was embroiled in a state of intense crisis. In fact, the country had spun into a myriad of political, social, economic, and environmental crises which amassed themselves to such an extent that a way out was difficult to imagine. Widespread government mismanagement and corruption, the intensification of political and social repression, rising poverty, a worsening economy, severe sanctions, political isolation, and increased involvement in regional conflicts had already plunged the country into distress.

Economic crisis and severe inflation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, had inflicted unprecedented pressures on both vulnerable groups and the middle class, who struggled to merely survive in adverse conditions and poverty. In these conditions, women, who have consistently faced disproportionate economic and employment instability, lost further ground. The election of a conservative president, the adoption of regressive policies on women's rights, the targeting and arrest of women human rights defenders, and the closure of registered women's NGOs as well as informal unregistered initiatives are all issues that combined to create an environment where violence and systematic discrimination against women were perpetually increasing.

The death in custody of Mahsa Jina Amini, which sparked nationwide protests, occurred in this arduous context. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprisings constitute the longest continuous protests since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. At a minimum, these protests have intensified the crisis of the Islamic Republic with over 500 protesters dead, hundreds injured and blinded, tens of thousands arrested, including civic activists and women human rights defenders, and many sentenced to long prison terms.

Leading up to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests, Iranians were subjected to and angered by several high-profile instances of violence against women and femicide, as well as numerous occurrences of police violence. Instead of heeding the call of women’s rights activists to protect women, the government and parliament adopted multiple problematic and highly contested policies designed to undermine women’s rights and achievements.

This report provides an overview of the intensification of pressures and violence against women, which reached their height during the first year of Raisi’s presidency, including state violence against women with respect to enforcement of mandatory hijab laws, increased violence and femicide without state intervention to reduce violence, increasing economic marginalization of women and feminization of poverty, and the targeting of women human rights defenders and restricting of the civic space. The report further discusses how the amassed pressures, along with the unjust death in custody of Mahsa Amini, triggered one of the longest national protests in the history of the Islamic Republic.

State Violence Against Women

● The Morality Police: Violence as a Weapon to Keep Women in Check

The history of the brutality of the morality police is not limited to the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini. Violent confrontations by the morality police have increased dramatically since March 2022. A prime example was the case of Reza Moradkhani, a former boxing champion in Iran and Asia, who was shot by the morality police in front of his wife and infant child as he took a stroll in a park with his family. Moradkhani intervened to prevent the harassment and humiliation of his wife, Maria Arefi, a former boxer, by the morality police. An altercation ensued, and Moradkhani [was shot by Iran’s morality police](#) on April 28th, 2022, in front of his infant child.

The morality police in its current form did not start with Ebrahim Raisi and has a long history, which can be traced to the summer of 2005 and the implementation of the “[Promotion of Social Safety Program](#).” However, Raisi not only failed to react to the violence committed by the morality police during his presidency, but even repeatedly emphasized the importance of observance of proper dress by women and the necessity for the propagation of hijab. On July 6th, 2022, he [ordered](#) the 2005 [Law to Promote Strategies for Hijab and Chastity](#), approved by the [Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution](#), to be implemented more forcefully. In essence, by issuing this order, he paved the way for more violence against women by the morality police.

Shortly thereafter, on July 19th, 2022, [a video](#) was posted on social media in which a crying mother threw herself in front of the morality police van, begging the officers not to arrest her sick daughter, while the police van coldly and indifferently kept on driving.



In a case which received broad public attention, especially on social media, Sepideh Rashnou was identified and arrested by IRGC forces after arguing with a hijab enforcer on a crowded bus in Tehran. On July 30th, 2022, after disappearing for weeks, Rashnou appeared on Iran's state television with a blank, withered face and visible bruises around one of her eyes. In a video clip [broadcast](#) on State Television, Rashnou made forced and false confessions against herself. [According to HRANA](#), Rashnou was beaten while in custody, suffering leg and other injuries.

● **Income Generation and Coercion through the Imposition of Heavy Hijab Fines**

The practice of income generation through the imposition of fines in relation to improper hijab has existed for some time. While [flogging and prison sentences for improper hijab or no hijab were customary in the 1980s](#), those punishments were largely replaced with fines in later years. In April 2019, the morality police started systematically [sending text messages summoning car owners](#) and impounding their cars for 1-7 days for not wearing their scarves while driving. Car owners whose cars were impounded were made responsible for paying the mandatory storage fees for their impounded vehicles.

Following several high-profile events with respect to hijab enforcement, Mohammad Saleh Hashemi Golpaigani, the secretary of [Iran's Task Force for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue](#), outlined his views on the shortcomings of hijab laws in an August 20, 2022, interview with [Mehr News Agency](#). He went on to explain that the act of appearing in public without a hijab should be viewed as an infraction, subject to fines, as opposed to a criminal offense. According to Golpaigani, a new hijab enforcement policy adopted by the Vice and Virtue Task Force deducts fines from the salaries of government managers whose female employees fail to observe proper coverings. He claimed further that government offices should not serve improperly veiled female clients; shops serving improperly veiled women would be fined; and improperly dressed women appearing in public places would be subject to an array of fines, the amounts of which would be determined based on their types of clothing and the number of infractions.

Law on Hijab:

While there has been much discussion on the proposed hijab bill, Article 638 of the Penal code (and specifically a related note) is the current law that governs women's dress.

Article 638- Anyone who explicitly violates any religious taboo in public, besides being punished for the act, should also be imprisoned from ten days to two months, or should be flogged (74 lashes).

Note- women who appear in public without a proper hijab should be imprisoned from ten days to two months or pay a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Ryal.

A few months after the start of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprisings, members of the Cultural Committee of the Iranian Parliament put forth a draft bill to impose greater limitations on women's dress and to ensure observance of mandatory hijab. [The parliamentary bill drafted by the Cultural Committee](#) includes seven articles and sets out a series of punishments for those who do not observe hijab laws, including fines ranging from 500,000 Tomans for individual offenders (appx. \$10) to 3 billion Tomans for businesses (appx. \$60,000). The Parliamentary draft bill was halted after Raisi's government put forth its own bill.

In April, immediately following the Iranian New Year, Ahmad Reza Radan, the Chief of Police, announced that, [starting from April 15, the police would use technology](#) such as cameras and facial recognition software to identify those who defy hijab laws in three sectors: public streets and roads, vehicles, and public spaces. According to Radan, women who appear in public without the hijab will first receive a warning, and should they continue to defy the laws, their cases will be referred to court. Cars whose drivers and passengers appear in public without the hijab will receive warnings, and in subsequent offenses, their vehicles will be impounded for a period of time. According to Said Montazer-ol-Mahdi, police spokesman, in the two months from the start of this program, [991,176 text messages were sent to drivers warning them about lack of observance of hijab within their vehicles](#). Likewise, public businesses will receive a warning and then be closed if their employees or customers refuse to abide by hijab laws. Reports indicate that [between April](#)

[22nd to April 28th, 2023, over 500 businesses across Iran were closed](#) for catering to women without hijab. This trend has continued since. Additionally, police and courts across the country have reported targeting and cracking down on social media users who expose their bodies online and sites and online accounts which “promote defiance of hijab.”

On June 18th, 2023, the Government’s proposed bill, [Supporting the Culture of Modesty and Hijab](#), was approved by the Judicial and Legal Committee of the Parliament. According to reports, the Government bill, which included 15 articles, institutes fines designed to coerce women into observing the hijab and punishing those who don’t, in place of the morality police. The Parliament added 55 articles to the bill and changed its name to [the Bill for Protection of the Family through Promoting the Culture of Modesty and Hijab](#).

This bill is worrisome due to the exorbitant amount of fines and other punishments it imposes on women who defy mandatory hijab laws and appear in public with their hair unveiled or wearing revealing clothing. For example, women who appear in public without the hijab or with revealing clothing that exposes body parts will face fines of up to 24 million Tomans (appx. \$500), which can increase up to 50 million Tomans (appx. \$1000) for repeat offenders. Car owners will also be fined if they or their passengers defy hijab regulations, and businesses will be heavily fined and ultimately closed for catering to women who defy hijab laws. Celebrities, including actors, athletes, social media influencers, or anyone who has fame or can influence the public, will be fined up to 10% of their assets and prevented from working for six months to five years. These celebrities and influencers will also be banned from travel for two years and will be banned from social media for six to 12 months for defying hijab laws. The fines imposed on those who refuse to obey hijab laws are especially exorbitant when one considers that the average monthly salary of a government employee, as set by the High Council of Work, is slightly over five million Tomans. In other words, women could face fines up to 5 times their salaries for refusing to wear hijab and up to 10 times their salaries if they continue their acts of defiance.

It is worth noting that, according to this bill, those who organize to defy or oppose hijab laws, as well as those who engage with foreign-based groups in opposing hijab laws, will face fines and prison terms. What is especially concerning about this bill is that it authorizes a multitude of police, security, and military establishments to counter women who defy observing the mandatory hijab, including the Task Force on Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue, the Police, the Ministry of Intelligence, Basij Militia groups, and the Intelligence Agency of the IRGC.

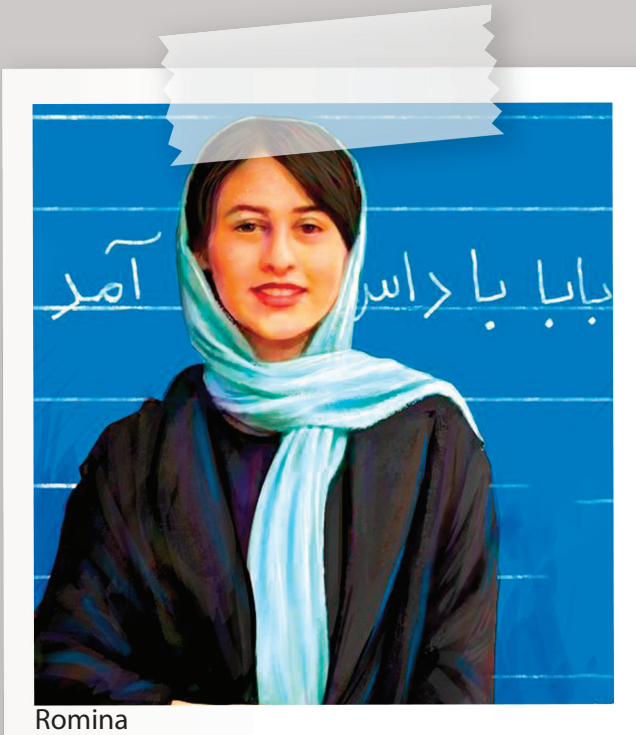
Given the mood of the country and the continued defiance of women when it comes to the mandatory hijab, it seems that Iranian policymakers, especially the Parliament, are aware that measures to punish women in this respect will be unpopular and may trigger broad-based anger. Perhaps it is for this reason that the current bill on hijab has been allocated to a special committee of Parliament, and as such, all discussions and decisions on the bill will be carried out privately by the Parliament. In other words, Iranian women will not be privy to any decisions and discussions on the Hijab Bill but will have to pay the price of decisions made by zealous policymakers whose careers are made by promoting violence against women. The expected revenues from this punitive policy against women are, in fact, so attractive that a public conflict on [which state body will benefit from the hijab revenues between the police and Raisi’s administration](#) has garnered much public attention. It seems Raisi’s administration was, in fact, the victor of this disagreement and will control and benefit from the revenues generated by hijab fines.

Femicide and Violence Against Women on the Rise

The existence of discriminatory laws against women, the lack of protective measures, and the absence of essential violence prevention programs and awareness-raising efforts have collectively contributed to

increases in the level of violence, abuse, and discrimination faced by women in their personal and family relationships, as well as in the workplace. Furthermore, the rising rates of poverty, inflation, and endless economic crises in recent years have caused an increase in child marriage and domestic violence.

According to figures published by Iran's Statistics Center, [in 2020, 31,379 girls ages 10 to 14 were married](#), which constitutes a 10.5% increase from 2019. This trend has continued into subsequent years. According to the latest reports, in the nine months between the winter of 2021 to the end of fall of 2022, [at least 27,448 girls under the age of 15 were married](#), signaling a rapid and worrisome rise in this phenomenon.



Romina

According to an official with Iran's [Legal Medicine Organization](#), in 2021, [about 75,000](#) domestic violence cases were investigated, accounting for 37% of all examinations. These statistics only reflect cases reported to authorities and referred to Forensic Medicine to verify the severity of the assault or identify other mental and physical injuries. Undoubtedly the actual statistics are even higher than those reported.

Despite these high figures, the government response is sorely lacking. According to Habibollah Masoudi Farid, the Deputy of Social Affairs at the State Welfare Organization, [there are approximately 27 women's shelters in the country, with a capacity for five persons at each shelter](#). Women's groups working to prevent violence against women are calling for better policies and services, but instead of receiving a response to their demands, these women human rights defenders (WHRDs) have faced security pressure

for decades. Licenses to operate shelters are rarely given to civil society groups, and such programs are not a priority for government institutions, leaving women who are facing violence to fend for themselves.

Atrocious femicides, especially those of teenage girls and young women, are other horrific examples of the extreme increases in violence against women in recent years. [Romina Ashrafi](#), a fourteen-year-old girl living in a village in Talesh, Province of Gilan, was beheaded by her father with a sickle at midnight on May 21st, 2020. Later, it was reported that Romina's father had consulted a lawyer before killing his daughter and that he only beheaded her after confirming that Iran's retribution laws would not apply to his case and that he would only have to serve a short prison sentence. This news caused widespread public anger. Following the killing of Romina Ashrafi, civil society groups and human rights activists once again criticized the shortcomings of existing retribution laws and called for measures that prevent violence against women and femicide and punish perpetrators appropriately.

[In his initial reaction to Romina's murder](#) at the meeting of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, who was the head of the Judiciary at that time, committed to punishing Romina's father for his crime. Raisi blamed the government of his rival, Hassan Rouhani, for failing to prevent such crimes. In the end, despite Raisi's proclamations, the Judiciary under his control issued [a 9-year prison sentence for Romina's father for violently killing his daughter](#). In fact, Raisi not only failed to take action on behalf of Romina as the head of the Judiciary, he has also not acted on her behalf since taking on the office of the President. This failure contributed to the gruesome [killing of Mona Heydari](#), which shocked and angered Iranians.

At the age of twelve, Mona was forced to marry her cousin, Sajjad Heydari, who was at least 15 years her senior. After facing repeated abuse by her husband and no support from her family and the law, Mona escaped to Turkey, where she became prey to traffickers. She returned to Iran at the insistence of her father and uncle, also her father-in-law, who falsely promised her protection from her husband. In February 2022, when she was only 17, Mona was beheaded by her husband, Sajjad Heydari. He then, holding her severed head in hand, paraded on the streets in an effort to redeem his “marred honor.” On January 18th, 2023, Mona’s husband [Sajjad Heydari](#) received a sentence of only 8 years and two months for the brutal murder of his young wife, angering many rights defenders who commented that his sentence is much less than prison sentences issued to WHRDs currently serving prison terms in relation to their advocacy on human rights and women’s rights.



Mona

Rather than passing legislation to protect women survivors of violence, the authorities have consistently protected male abusers and killers. In an unprecedented verdict, Sina Qalandari, the journalist who identified the murderer of [Mobina Suri](#), was sentenced to a prison term of two years and three months for publishing a picture of Mobina and her murderer on his Telegram channel. He was also banned from working as a journalist for two years, and his Telegram channel, where he shared news and information, was also seized for two years. Mobina Suri, a 16-year-old woman, was murdered by her husband, a young cleric,

on August 29th, 2021, less than a year after her marriage. Her body was discovered in an orchard a few days later. Her husband, who had confessed to the murder, is currently free on a third-person guarantee and living an everyday life a few months after being sentenced to less than three years in prison.

Laws on Femicide

Iranian law facilitates femicide carried out in the name of honor, and often reduces sentences for crimes of femicide. Under Iranian law, if the families of murdered victims do not request “qisas”, a concept allowing retribution in kind and leading to a death sentence, judges can sentence a murderer to up to 10 years in prison. In many cases of femicide, however, families know the murderer. Those in a position to decide on qisas are often related to both the victim and the murderer, so they decide against the harsh punishment of retribution. Furthermore, prosecutors often do not seek longer sentences, and judges release such convicts after a few years in prison.

With the news of each case of femicide in recent years, women’s rights defenders and journalists have repeatedly stressed the need to change the laws that enable femicide in the name of defending honor while also advocating for the adoption of protective measures and laws designed to punish perpetrators and protect women victims of violence. Iranian women and rights defenders had waited 12 long years for a bill titled “[Protection, Dignity, and Security of Women against Violence](#)” that promised to finally define violence against women and adopt measures to prevent it. This bill, despite some shortcomings, addressed women’s long time demands by defining and criminalizing the different forms of violence against women, and also called for services to support survivors of violence.

However, after much back and forth between various government bodies and the watering down of the bill, the chair of the women's fraction in the Parliament announced in February 2023 that they were reviewing a bill titled "[Prevention of Harm against Women and Increasing Women's Security in the Face of Mistreatment](#)." This new bill, which fails even to mention the word violence, [passed the initial review](#) by Parliament in April 2023 and is scheduled for a full vote by Parliament.

In September 2022, [Shiler Rasouli](#), a 36-year-old mother of two from Marivan, died after she threw herself out of the window of a two-story building aiming to escape being raped by her neighbor at gunpoint. Hearing her screams for help, neighbors called the police for help. However, the officers did not enter the house after arriving on the scene, claiming they did not have a warrant to do so.

Instead of using her position to implement plans and programs to prevent child marriage, reduce violence against women, and change misogynist beliefs and attitudes, Ensieh Khazali, the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs of Iran, reacted to this tragedy by attributing Shiler's death to her femininity, purity, and the embodiment of "[religious education, chastity, honor, and decency](#)." Meanwhile, Marivan residents and women human rights defenders [protested in front of the courthouse to protest the lack of safety for women](#) and to demand swift action by the judicial system after Shiler's death. Shiler died from her injuries on September 8th, 2022, after three days at a hospital in Sanandaj, and only three days before Mahsa Jina Amini was arrested by the morality police and subsequently killed in custody.

Economic Marginalization of Women

The [economic participation rate of women in Iran, which now stands at 14.1%](#), is low in comparison to global and regional trends. Economic crisis has exacerbated women's poor rate of economic participation, with little hope on the horizon. According to Iran's Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare, in 2021, [40% of women between the ages of 15 and 24 were neither studying nor employed](#). Instead of seeking to improve the dire economic situation of women, Raisi's government has sought to economically marginalize women further.

● Plans to Remove Women from the Labor Market

During Raisi's presidency, there has been a rise in policies consistent with the government's ideological beliefs that being a mother and a wife are the most essential duties of women. With the consolidation of power by hardliners in all three branches of government, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary, the stage was set for the rapid approval and implementation of laws designed to exclude women from the public sphere and force them into subordinate positions.

The [Rejuvenation of the Population and Protection of the Family](#) law, which aims to promote population growth, seriously undermines women's bodily autonomy, and bans their access to reproductive healthcare and services, was fully approved by the Guardian Council only seventeen days after its approval in the parliament. On November 15th, 2021, President Raisi ordered the Ministry of Health and the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs to implement the law.

Additionally, the "[Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence](#)," which was removed from the parliament's agenda in 2013 due to widespread opposition, was approved by the parliament and the Guardian Council in November of 2021. Implementation of this law will further limit women's employment opportunities. For example, according to the ninth article of this plan, "in all government and non-government sectors, the priority for employment is given to men with children, then married men without children, and then women with children." According to Article 10 of the Plan, "five years after the effective date of this law, the recruitment and hiring of unmarried school teachers and faculty members by all

governmental and non-governmental universities and higher education, research institutes and schools at all levels will be prohibited.” Additionally, according to Article 16 of the Plan, only lawyers who are married and over 40 can represent clients in family courts.

Also, according to a [resolution approved on May 9th, 2022](#), married persons and those with children will be given higher ranks and marks and therefore prioritized when applying for academic positions in universities. In the case of two candidates with equal ranks, priority will be given to the married applicant.

These new population promotion policies, which aim to unravel women’s social achievements, will in fact increase women’s unemployment rate, which is already [twice the rate of men’s unemployment](#) and [three times the rate of women’s unemployment worldwide](#). These policies exacerbate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which along with the Iranian state’s mismanagement of the health crisis and its delay in importing vaccines, aided in pushing many women out of the workforce. In fact, due to COVID-19, more women were dismissed from the labor market than men were without the possibility of return. According to the data from the Iranian Statistical Center, in the spring of 2020, [nearly 2 million people left the labor market](#), but by the end of the year, the number of employed people in the country had decreased by 1,010,470 compared to the same time the previous year. Of these, 347,618 were men, and 662,852 were women. In other words, out of 19.6 million men with jobs, 347,000 lost theirs, whereas out of 3.6 million women with jobs, 662,000 lost theirs. That is a 15% reduction in the number of women in the labor force over a one-year period. This data shows that while men found new opportunities to return to the labor market, the employment rate of women continued to decline. In the Spring of 2022, of the 31,783 million women over the age of 15 who were of working age, only 4.4 million were actively employed.

Proof of the continued rate of decline in women’s employment, even post-COVID pandemic, can be found in the official report of Iran’s Statistical Center. [This report indicates](#) that the unemployment rate for women between the ages of 18-35 increased from 26.5% in the winter of 2022 to 27.7% by the winter of 2023, which translates into the loss of employment for more than 52,000 women in one year.

● **Feminization of Poverty and Increase in the Number of Welfare-Dependent Women**

Mismanagement, widespread government corruption, negligence, and inability to provide for citizens’ basic needs and livelihoods, along with harsh sanctions which have obliterated Iran’s economy, have denied ordinary Iranians minimum living standards. Iran ranks 128 among 130 countries in terms of economic resilience. In 2020, [Iran held the record for the highest rate of depreciation of its national currency in the world](#). In May 2021, the inflation rate increased by [43% compared to the same period the previous year](#), the highest rate in 25 years. As a result, there was a reduction in quantity and a shift in the types of food and essential goods purchased. [In July 2021, food spending had decreased by about 35% compared to](#)



[the same period the year before](#). The devastating trends have continued. The inflation rate continues to rise, and in February 2023, the inflation rate rose to 45.8%. The high inflation rates have impacted poor and middle-class communities most severely, limiting their ability to purchase basic necessities and food even further.

The official statistics of the Housing and Building Department of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development show that residential rents in [Tehran increased by 50% in the spring of 2022](#), which marks the start of the Iranian new year. While rent increases take place yearly and usually at the beginning of the Iranian New Year in March, these increases are now happening more regularly, contributing to a housing and economic crisis for renters. For example, in a six-month span of time, between June 2022 and December 2022, rents in Tehran increased by an additional 30%, beyond the 50% they had already increased.

Economic crises experienced in recent years have increased housing costs to such an extent that [43% of the household expenses of renters in urban areas are allocated to housing](#). This is 2.2 times the world average. The allocation to housing for tenants residing in the Capital city of Tehran is more than 50% of household expenses. These statistics gain more significance when you also consider that according to official statistics, the rate of renters in Iran has increased from 12% in 1986 to 38% in 2020, which means that currently, 32 million Iranians are impacted by housing rent issues.

[According to research](#), the number of poor in Iran doubled from 2011-2021, and another four million people fell below the international poverty line of \$5.5 per day. Additionally, about eight million people have fallen from the «middle» economic class to the «lower middle» economic class. According to [the Poverty Survey officially published for the first time](#) in August of 2022 by the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare, the number of people living below the poverty line increased by 38% between 2019 to 2020. The poverty rate has been calculated to be about 32% (2018), which means that approximately one-third of Iran's population had an income below the poverty line, and this group has continued to expand. The second Poverty Survey Report published in January 2023 indicates that between 2020 and 2021, those living below the absolute poverty line have doubled in number, placing one-third of Iran's population below the absolute poverty line.

Undoubtedly, the spread of poverty and economic collapse has a doubled effect on women with lesser access to the employment market and financial resources. On the other hand, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of female-headed households increased by 26%. According to surveys, from February 2020 to September 2021, [126,549 women and children lost a breadwinner or a family member to COVID-19](#) and struggled with subsistence; 54% of those women became the head of their household. Half of all households with children affected by the death of the breadwinner and half of the female-headed households affected by COVID-19 are in the bottom three economic deciles, and only one-third of these households receive support from organizations such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the National Welfare Organization.

An examination of the financial support amounts provided to families below the poverty line by the National Welfare Organization in 2022 sheds light on the dismal conditions of female-headed households and the inability of the state to provide adequate safety nets. In 2022, the Iranian government set the poverty line for a family of four at 7 million tomans per month, which is widely contested as an inadequate figure. In the same period, housing costs for urban tenant families close to the poverty line were at least 2.454 million Tomans monthly. The welfare benefit for a family of four in 2022 was set at 1 million 80 thousand, covering one-seventh of the minimal cost of living.

It goes without saying that in deprived, underdeveloped, and marginalized provinces, female-headed households are experiencing worse economic and social conditions. The province of Sistan and Baluchestan,

which suffers from underdevelopment and has consistently been dealt with through a security lens, instead of a development lens by Iranian authorities, because of its ethnic and religious minority population and because it is a border province, has more than [93 thousand female-headed households](#) and seventy percent of these women are under the age of 40. During and following the COVID pandemic, this province experienced the highest rate of increase in female-headed households, including the highest rate for households headed by girls under 18.

Restricting and Closing Civic Space and Targeting WHRDs

The Iranian women's movement dates back over one hundred years. Since the revolution and the adoption of laws based on a conservative interpretation of Sharia law, which further embedded discrimination against women in the law, Iranian women and the women's movement have continually pushed for change, more rights, and legal reform. Women, however, have continuously faced backlash by the state for their civic and peaceful activism. The only relatively open period for civil society was the reform period during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami when women's groups were able to set up independent NGOs and openly advocate for change. During the last year of Khatami's presidency, however, a long-running assault on women's groups began, which has continued to this day. The assault against women's groups intensified throughout the eight year Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During this period, almost all independent women's organizations were shut down by security forces, their efforts to create networks and campaigns in support of women's rights were thwarted, and scores of women activists were beaten on the streets during peaceful protests and ultimately arrested for their peaceful activism in demand of legal equality and an end of violence against women. By the time Rouhani was elected in 2013, most formal and informal women's groups had been rendered inactive, and only a handful of feminist service delivery organizations were operational. Many observers hoped that the Rouhani administration would pave the way for increased activism of independent civil society, including women's groups. For this reason, a number of new initiatives were established at the outset of his Presidency. Some, such as the [Campaign to Change the Male Face of Parliament](#), designed to elect more women to parliament, were quickly shut down due to security pressures. Other smaller and informal initiatives faced pressures but survived nonetheless. Still, the Rouhani administration was not favorable to independent women's groups which continued to face serious barriers in registration and organizing.

While the "moderate" Rouhani claimed that during his presidency, [the number of NGOs had increased from 4,300 to 9,800](#), the pressures on civil society activists also increased. By Rouhani's second term, the pressure on civil society was even greater than that experienced during the repressive presidency of hardline Ahmadinejad. Towards the end of Rouhani's presidency in fact, all forms of peaceful civic activism, even acts that were minimal in their challenges to the state and had previously been tolerated, were met with pressures from security forces. These pressures included the closure of NGOs, interrogations of activists and women human rights defenders, travel bans, detentions, trials, and ultimately prison sentences. Activists were summoned and interrogated by multiple security agencies, including the Intelligence of the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence, which was the security agency under the control of the President.

The few civic organizations that worked on mitigating societal harms and empowering vulnerable populations, particularly children and young women, including [Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society](#) and [Omid- Mehr Foundation](#), which supported young vulnerable girls in out-of-home care, were shut down, their members interrogated and jailed and their licenses revoked, leaving a clear vacuum in services for vulnerable populations in need.

This trend intensified under Raisi's presidency. In 2022, after 15 years of providing drug rehabilitation services to women affected by addiction in the Darvaz-e Ghar neighborhood, a marginalized and impoverished

community afflicted by social problems and poverty, the [House of Sun](#) (Khaney-e Khorshid), ended its operation. The founders of this organization described their decision to be a “forced closure resulting from pressures.”

Furthermore, after two decades of operation in the same location, the [Nasser Khosro Children’s Home](#), an NGO providing children’s rights and welfare services, was rendered homeless when the Tehran Municipality ordered its eviction in March 2022. In Kerman, the National Endowments and Charity Organization, a state body in charge of endowments, evicted the NGO, Home for Working Children, from their offices. The costs for a similar location was so high that eventually, the NGO was forced to cease its operation. Other institutions suffered a similar fate, although their founders preferred not to go public.

● **Intensification of Pressures on Informal Civic Groups and WHRDs**

Since March 2022, which marks the start of the Iranian new year, and nearly a year into the Presidency of Raisi, the security forces not only continued their pressures on the few remaining registered civic organizations but targeted and pressured informal initiatives and WHRDs working on women and children’s rights or the rights of marginalized groups. In an effort to render women’s initiatives inactive, two members of the «[Free-Harassment Workplace](#)» an informal group working to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, were arrested.

Iranian authorities have also targeted women’s initiatives and WHRDs active on social media platforms. As the civic space has shrunk, the Iranian women’s movement has come to rely more and more on social media for raising awareness, disseminating its information, organizing events and petitions, and for training efforts. Activists and their online accounts are regularly [targeted through coordinated attacks](#) and smear campaigns. Activists are also charged and arrested for their expression of ideas and online activities. When 800 women working in the film industry signed and [published an online statement about sexual harassment in their workplaces](#), the organizers of the petition and some of the higher-profile women who signed on faced security pressures, including interrogation, travel bans, and summons to court.

Also during this period, a number of women human rights defenders working in different sectors were detained and later faced trials and sentences, including [Child Rights Advocate Samin Ehsani](#) and WHRDs and Labor Rights activists [Reyhaneh Ansarinejad](#) and [Anisha Assadollahi](#).

In several cases women human rights defenders who had been detained and sentenced previously, including during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, and whose sentences had not been implemented were summoned to begin serving their prison terms. For example, photojournalist and WHRD [Raha Askarizadeh](#), WHRDs Akram Nassirian, Asrin Darkaleh, and Maryam Mohammadi, [members of “Voice of Iran’s Women,”](#) an informal initiative promoting women’s rights and advocating against the mandatory hijab; and [Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet](#) Bahai’i women who advocated for the need of their community, were among those called in to begin serving their prison terms. The broad implementation of sentences against women human rights defenders during Raisi’s presidency and continued detention and persecution of rights activists indicated a more forceful approach toward the women’s movement and women rights defenders in general.

It was in the midst of this continued but intensified assault against the members of the women’s movement and civil society in general that the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests were sparked. These protests have served as an excuse to carry out more systematic crackdowns against women journalists, women human rights defenders and feminists, working individually or in small groups. Immediately and in the first few days following the start of the protests, hundreds of women human rights defenders, feminists, female student activists, women journalists, university professors, and lawyers were arrested. With the start of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests, the summoning of WHRDs to begin serving their prison sentences also

intensified. Pending prison terms of WHRDs were implemented in haste, including the sentences of WHRD [Bahareh Hedayat](#), journalist [Vida Rabani](#), and student activist [Soha Mortezaie](#). This crackdown quickly expanded to include both men and women active in civil society, and while, according to the head of the Judiciary, Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejehee, these [pre-emptive arrests were intended to prevent activists from joining or leading protests](#), they certainly were a continuation of a policy of intense repression against women's groups that started before the Presidency of Raisi but was seriously intensified after he took office and the ultra-conservatives consolidated their power.

Discontent, Protest, and State Violence against Dissenters and Protesters

● The Final Straw: Death in Custody of Mahsa Jina Amini

The death of Mahsa Jina Amini while in the custody of the morality police caused a wave of anger and hatred toward forceful and violent police encounters with women. This anger quickly turned into national protests, initially demanding accountability for her death and an end to forceful monitoring of Hijab regulations. Protesters' demands, however, quickly transformed into a call for fundamental political change.

Mahsa Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman visiting Tehran, was arrested by the morality police in the presence of her brother. A few hours later, she was taken to the hospital in a coma. Reports indicate that Mahsa was violently beaten by the morality police at the time of arrest and afterwards and was pronounced dead in hospital three days later. Kasra Hospital officials published a statement on the hospital's Instagram account, which was deleted within a few hours. In this statement, they announced that: "Mahsa Amini was taken to Kasra hospital at 8:22 p.m. on the 22nd of Shahrivar (September 13, 2022) with cardiac arrest, no vital signs, and brain death." Following a common practice in similar cases, officials declared that Mahsa's death resulted from a stroke and underlying pre-existing medical conditions and defended the actions of the morality police. Meanwhile, in numerous interviews, Mahsa's family categorically denied any history of heart or brain disease during her short life.

Through the resistance and perseverance of Mahsa's family and despite the pressure from the security forces to bury Mahsa secretly and quickly, Mahsa's funeral ceremony was held in Saqqez, her home city, where large crowds of people were in attendance. During her funeral, the women of Saqqez took off their headscarves to protest the senseless death of Mahsa Jina and began using the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom", or Jin, Jian, Azadi, which has a history in the Kurdish women's liberation movements. This slogan was picked up nationally and then internationally as the wave of protests spread from Saqqez to Sanandaj and other cities in Kurdistan and across Iran.



Initially, the demands of those protesting focused on accountability and justice in the case of Mahsa Jina Amini and the elimination of the Morality Police but these demands quickly expanded to include fundamental freedoms and political change.

Students started protesting in various universities; women's groups called for protests as well. There were demonstrations on the streets in multiple cities; women cut their hair and burnt their headscarves in a show of solidarity; even high school girls joined protests. Fashion designers pledged to stop the production and supply of scarves; female artists removed their hijab; several other artists stated their opposition to the use of their images or films by the state-run broadcasting organization, IRIB, (Seda va Sima); and a number of prominent and famous athletes released statements supporting the protests and announcing their refusal to participate on national teams. Soon after, the wave of protests spread to other countries around the globe, some organized by Iranians living abroad and others by women's groups to show solidarity with Iranian women.

In response, the government resorted to the customary beating and killing of protesters. Some areas of the country turned into virtual war zones. Kurds and Baluchis, two ethnic minority groups, who have historically suffered greatly because of underdevelopment, structural exclusion, and a securitized state approach under the rule of the Islamic Republic, have paid the heaviest costs, with many dead, injured, and their cities surrounded by military forces. Security forces arrested scores of women human rights defenders, feminists, journalists, student activists, artists, public figures, political activists, families of victims, and dissatisfied citizens. Lawyers who had volunteered to represent the detainees have also come under pressure, including interrogation, detention, and sentencing. According to reports, over 20,000 persons were arrested in relation to these protests. Over 500 have been killed so far, with nearly half of those being Baluchi and Kurdish citizens. [Over 30 of those killed were women](#) and over 60 were children. [Nearly 300 women human rights defenders were arrested](#). After several months in detention, many WHRDs were pardoned, some remain in detention, some have been issued heavy prison sentences and new cases on security charges have been initiated for others, including some of those who were pardoned.

Iran Protests: Feminists and WHRDs Detained

Immediately after the start of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprisings, security forces began detaining WHRDs, feminist activists, student activists, journalists, lawyers, scholars, and researchers in a preemptive attempt to prevent them from leading or joining protests. Given the repressive context in which these WHRDs work, many of them were unknown outside of their immediate circles. For this reason, Femena began documenting the arrests of these WHRDs, in an effort to give them greater visibility and support. In [8 reports, Femena verified and documented 257 cases of WHRDs](#) who were detained following the start of protests. The numbers of those detained are of course much higher, but because family members are reluctant or fearful about publicizing the arrests of their loved ones, it is often difficult to verify the situation. While some of these WHRDs have since been temporarily released pending trial, and some were released on a general pardon, many still remain in prison. Those remaining in prison have either been issued heavy prison sentences or face potentially long prison terms. Some of those released temporarily or pardoned have been called in for interrogation and some are facing new charges. Leading up to the one year anniversary of the protests, many other WHRDs have been detained, including the family members of protesters killed during the protests. Femena will continue to highlight some of these cases through reports, statements, or campaigns on our social media accounts.

● The First National Protests Focused on Women's Demands

Since the Iranian Revolution, many major protests have been held demanding women's rights. The first was a women's demonstration held in Tehran. This protest, organized on March 8th, 1979, objected to the imposition of mandatory hijab laws as well as other restrictions on women and drew tens of thousands.

Since then, several protests have been held in various cities, including cities such as Tehran, Sanandaj,

and Rasht, aiming to object to the numerous legal and other forms of discrimination imposed on women. Protests have also been held by women negatively impacted by the law or women's rights defenders objecting to particular legal measures. In fact, women's advocacy and protests have successfully created limited but important changes in discriminatory legal measures, encouraging the adoption of laws and regulations that are more supportive of women, and preventing the passage of further discriminatory measures against women. In 1985, widows whose husbands had been martyred in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war advocated for and organized protests to [maintain custody of their children as well as control over state financial support provided to children of martyrs](#). In November 2003, laws were passed in response to objections and protests by child rights advocates and the women's movement following the [killing of a eight year-old girl by the name of Aryan in 1998](#), by her father and stepmother. Those objecting to Aryan's death demanded that mothers be given custody of their children. [The law was changed to allow custody rights for mothers in cases of divorce](#). Accordingly, the new law allowed women to maintain custody of their male children up to the age of 7 (previously, it was two years) in line with custody rights of mothers over their girl children.

Objections and protests demanding that [women be allowed into sports stadiums](#) were first organized in 2005 by women's rights activists. These protests have continued from time to time over the years, with ordinary women joining rights defenders or acting as organizers. Those advocating women's presence won some limited concessions when FIFA demanded that Iran change its policies.

Other notable protests to discriminatory laws by women's rights defenders and women impacted by negative and discriminatory laws included protests held by women whose children had [been denied national identity cards because laws restricted the ability of women to pass on their nationality to children](#), which ultimately resulted in the adoption of temporary regulations in 2019, [allowing women to pass on their nationality to their children](#). Much to the dismay of women and women's rights activists, [the law was overturned in 2023](#). Women's rights defenders also held protests in front of the parliament objecting to the [Family Protection Bill, which aimed to ease restrictions on polygamy](#). As a result of objections, the law was abandoned. Also, in 2012 women's rights defenders protested [proposals aimed to restrict women's ability to obtain passports and to travel](#).

Notable protests organized by women's movement activists have included one [in front of the University of Tehran](#), organized in the more open political environment in the lead-up to the presidential elections (June 12, 2005). A similar protest the following year, which resulted in the arrest of nearly 70 rights defenders and prison terms for organizers, shocked most observers with the unprecedented [violence used against protesters, including by female police](#). More recently, [women in Kurdistan held several protests](#) to object to honor killings and the mishandling of the case of Shiler Rasouli and the inability of the police to protect her from her rapist, which resulted in her death.

The protests following the death in custody of Mahsa Jina Amini are the first nationwide protests in support of women's rights and demanding accountability for the killing of a woman. Other noteworthy national protests included the 2009 protests objecting to what Iranians believed to be rigged elections and national protests in 2017 and 2019 largely focused on economic issues. Smaller local or multi-city protests, which have increased considerably in recent years, include protests by the labor movement, teachers movement, retired workers, and student movement. Like most past protests, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests have been met with extreme violence.

While the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Protests, referred to by many Iranians as the Jina uprisings, have waned, they can by no means be considered finished. Weekly protests continue in Sistan and Baluchestan. Women continue to defy state regulations and pressures through civic resistance to hijab laws, despite facing heavy fines and even imprisonment. In fact, Iranians continue to use every opportunity to express their discontent,

whether on social media or in public space. Instead of listening to the demands of the Iranian people, in the lead up to the one year anniversary of protests and in an effort to prevent further protests, state security has threatened or detained scores of rights defenders, journalists, civic activists and families of protesters killed by security forces over the last year. It is clear that while the main points of citizens' discontent remain unmet by the state, and while there is little opportunity for Iranians to organize civic groups to support change and betterment of society, Iranians will continue to protest and engage in peaceful acts of dissent.

Recommendations

Regional and International Women's Movements and Human Rights Groups:

- Express solidarity with Iranian women and the Iranian women's movement. Listen to and amplify the voices of Iranian women, in particular women human rights defenders inside the country.
- Engage Iranian women human rights defenders in a meaningful and safe manner, especially those inside the country, offering them opportunities to participate in and be heard at regional and international events.
- Support and protect women human rights defenders who face security threats.

Governments:

- Western governments, especially those with feminist foreign policies, must prioritize support for women human rights defenders under threat or at risk. Emergency and rapid response programs and respite and fellowship opportunities for those who need a break or temporary protection must be established and/or made available to Iranian WHRDs. Additionally, governments must facilitate the issuance of visas to WHRDs, allowing them to easily attend conferences and/or participate in respite or fellowship programs. Most importantly, governments must commit to supporting at risk or under threat WHRDs who have been forced to leave the country with relocation programs and humanitarian visas.
- The Government of Switzerland must address the issue of women's rights and the targeting of civil society, especially women's groups and WHRDs, during its human rights dialogue with Iran that is planned for the beginning of 2024.
- Governments of countries neighboring Iran, especially Turkey and the KRG in Iraq, must guarantee the safety and avoid the deportation of WHRDs and protesters who have been forced to take refuge in third countries. Some of these WHRDs have had their passports confiscated and/or are facing travel bans. As such, they have been forced to leave Iran illegally to search for asylum.
- Governments in the Global South with strong human rights records, who enjoy good diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran must pressure Iranian authorities to end their use of violence against and systematic targeting of civil society, WHRDs, and protesters and to end discriminatory practices against women.

The United Nations:

- UN Country Offices in Islamic Republic of Iran:
 - ◆ UN offices in Iran must use opportunities for engagement with Iranian authorities to raise the issue of women's rights in a systematic and principled manner.
 - ◆ They must question authorities and push back on the systematic security crackdown against independent civil society, especially formal and informal women's groups.
 - ◆ UN offices must also actively engage independent civil society groups and women human rights defenders in developing and implementing programs designed to support and protect women and girls

from violence and discrimination and increase the social, political and economic participation of women and girls.

- ◆ The UNDP country office must advocate for improved and inclusive policy on economic participation of women, especially women in marginalized areas, women from ethnic and religious minority communities, and women heads of households.
- ◆ The UNFPA country office must hold the government of Iran accountable for its draconian policies related to women's reproductive health and rights and must actively document the negative impact of these policies on the health, welfare, and rights of Iranian women and girls.
- ◆ The UNICEF country office must proactively engage with and push Iranian authorities to raise the age of marriage and prevent policies designed to lower the age of marriage. UNICEF must also document the negative impact of population promotion policies and increased poverty on the welfare and health of women and girls, and advocate improved policies and laws that protect girls and women from harm and violence. Toward this end, UNICEF must also actively engage independent civil society groups and rights defenders in developing and implementing programs to support and protect Iranian women and girls.
- ◆ The UNICEF and WHO country offices must conduct a joint and independent investigation into the poisoning of girls' schools and report to the public and the international community the extent of the attacks and health implications for school girls who were poisoned. These agencies must further push Iranian authorities to hold accountable and punish those responsible for the poisonings.

● UN Office Of High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Special Procedures:

- ◆ Women's rights in Iran should be a priority issue for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Special Procedures and as such, they must commit to better and more consistent reporting on the matter.
- ◆ Mandate holders such as the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls; the UNSR on Violence against Women and Girls; UNSR on the Right to Health; and UNSR on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, must report independently or jointly with other relevant UNSRs on the status of Iranian women and girls.
- ◆ UNSR on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran should work collaboratively with other mandate holders to consistently address and highlight the situation of women in Iran. Of special attention to this mandate holder should be the systematic crackdown on women's independent civil society and the persecution of women human rights defenders, which can be addressed jointly with the UNSR on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, the UNSR on Freedom of Expression and Opinion, and the UNSR on Human Rights Defenders.

● The Fact Finding Mission (FFM) on Iran:

- ◆ The FFM must continue to investigate violations of human rights in relation to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprisings, including violations currently being committed, which aim to prevent Iranians, rights defenders and the families of protesters killed last year, from commemorating deaths or leading protests.
- ◆ The FFM must not only investigate violations in relations to its mandate, but must also link these developments with long standing discriminations suffered by Iranian women and other socially excluded groups.

● UN Women:

- ◆ UN Women must engage with the Iranian women's movement and address the crisis facing women in Iran within the framework of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.
- ◆ UN Women must monitor the situation of Iranian women and their struggle against discrimination and patriarchy. UN Women must make honest and principled efforts to engage with the independent women's

movement inside the country in a safe manner, echoing their concerns and priorities. In cases where connections inside are not feasible, UN Women must consult with WHRDs with a solid track record on promoting Iranian women's rights.

● The International Labor Organization:

◆ In line with its Convention on Prevention of Gender-based Violence and Sexual Harassment in the World of Work (C-190), the ILO and its member states must pressure Iranian authorities to adopt laws in line with their obligations. Furthermore, the ILO must hold Iranian authorities accountable for - and pressure them to end - their targeting and persecution of women human rights defenders who have worked to prevent SGBV and sexual harassment in the workplace and those women who have spoken up collectively in this respect.


Social Media Platforms:


● Social media platforms must monitor and prevent coordinated behavior targeting the accounts of Iranian women human rights defenders and their initiatives or organizations.


● Farsi speaking staff should be hired to monitor and identify harmful language targeting and defaming women and especially WHRDs.

● Strategies and mechanisms for identifying harmful content and addressing and preventing hate speech must be developed, along with protective mechanisms for women who are expressing views online and are at risk of arrest.



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Femena supports women human rights defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in the MENA and Asia regions. Femena is particularly focused on contexts where civil society space is limited or closed and aims to raise awareness about the impact of shrinking civic space on women and progressive feminist movements.

Femena's country and regional briefs provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and movements.