

# Iran's War on Women

UNITED  
AGAINST  
NUCLEAR  
**IRAN**

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The Iranian regime systematically discriminates against women, treating them as second-class citizens. Tehran enables and engages in violence against women and sexual exploitation of girls; harasses, jails, fines, flogs women—and [now reportedly has killed one](#)—for ‘crimes’ like appearing in public without covering their hair and bodies; cracks down on activists for women’s rights; forcibly segregates women from men; disproportionately punishes women in the judicial system; denies women political and economic opportunities; and favors men over women in family and inheritance law.

## Head Covering: Violently Enforced by the Regime

Since shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime has [mandated](#) that women and girls above the age of nine wear a hijab (Islamic head-covering) in public. The government [crushed protests](#) against the then-new requirement.

Iran’s [Islamic Penal Code](#) states: “Women, who appear in public places and roads without wearing an Islamic hijab, shall be sentenced to ten days to two months’ imprisonment or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred [thousand] Rials,” (Article 638). The article also authorizes a sentence of “two months in prison or up to 74 lashes” for “[anyone] who openly commits a harām (sinful) act, in addition to the punishment provided for the act.” (The severe devaluation of the Rial has reduced the impact of the fine, which translated to about \$1.20–12 as of October 3, 2022).

Women who fail to wear headscarves and other attire covering their bodies in public may be harassed by the “[Morality Police](#)” (MP), detained, fined, and/or flogged.

Many Iranians have expressed opposition to mandatory hijab, including through the “[White Wednesdays](#)” campaign (begun in 2017), in which Iranians wear white headscarves or other clothing on Wednesdays in protest.

In December 2017, Tehran’s police chief, Gen. Hossein Rahimi, [announced](#) that officers would cease arresting and charging women for dress code violations. However, the authorities reversed their policy after the nationwide protests against the regime in late December and early January. During the demonstrations, Iranian women publicly removed their headscarves and waved them in the air. Videos of these acts of defiance by women dubbed “The Girls of Revolution Street” [went viral](#) worldwide.

In response, Gen. Rahimi [announced](#) a zero-tolerance policy against the protestors, warning that “Although the sentence for not wearing a hijab [head-covering] is two months in prison, anyone encouraging others to take off their hijab will be jailed for 10 years.” The latter punishment would be applied by trying protesters for the crimes of “[inciting corruption and prostitution](#)” under article 639 of the [Islamic Penal Code](#).

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President Ebrahim Raisi has sharply [increased the enforcement of the hijab](#). In July 2022, he instituted a “hijab and chastity” decree prioritizing hijab enforcement, including harsh regulations on women’s dress in workplaces and increased government propaganda about the hijab. Women not wearing “complete hijab” (covering not only the hair but the neck and shoulders) have been [prohibited](#) from entering government offices and banks and using public transit. And the head of the Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice announced that the regime would [utilize facial-recognition technology for hijab enforcement](#), likely exploiting data from new biometric identity cards.

The regime [increased patrols of the Morality Police](#) to monitor hijab compliance, with arbitrary detentions—and sometimes beatings—if even a few strands of hair were uncovered. Secretly recorded videos of Morality Police abuses circulated online. One woman, 28-year-old [Sepideh Rashno](#), was arrested and beaten, and then state television broadcast her forced “apology.” Her face was [covered with bruises](#).

## *Arrest and Death of Mahsa Amini and Resulting Protests*

On September 13, 2022, the Morality Police [arrested 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian Mahsa Amini](#) in the street in Tehran while she was visiting the city with her family. The Morality Police [told](#) Amini’s brother that they were detaining her for “improper” hijab and taking her to an “educational and orientation class.” They threw her into a van and, according to eyewitnesses, [beat her](#) in the vehicle while en route to the police station.

The Morality Police [informed](#) her brother two hours after her arrest, as he waited outside the station for her, that she had suffered a heart attack and brain seizure. He watched an ambulance take her, comatose, to the hospital. “I found her face swollen and her legs black and blue,” her brother [said](#) after visiting her.

Amini [died](#) on September 16, 2022.

That day, state television [broadcast a video](#) purporting to show Amini going into the class, walking toward an officer, and falling down abruptly. President Raisi [called](#) Amini’s father, Amjad, conveying his condolences and promising to initiate an investigation. Amjad [said](#) to the press that he told Raisi the televised video was “lies” and “censored.” Amjad also [claimed](#) the authorities had refused to show him surveillance footage of his daughter’s trip inside the police van.

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Thousands of Iranians across the country have [taken to the streets](#) to protest against the regime after Amini's death. Demonstrators have chanted "Women, life, freedom," "Death to Khamenei," "Death to the dictator." Women are [increasingly going outside without a hijab](#), with some publicly removing and even burning their hijabs and cutting their hair.

The regime [arrested](#) the female journalist who first drew widespread attention to Amini's death, Niloufar Hamed, and is reportedly keeping her in solitary confinement at the [notoriously brutal](#) Evin Prison.

There have been additional reports of women protesters dying amid the 2022 crackdown on the unrest. 16-year-old Nika Shakarami disappeared ten days after protesting in Tehran on September 20, 2022. BBC Persian [reported](#) in her last message to a friend, she indicated she was being pursued by Iranian security forces. Nika was later found with her nose crushed and skull broken. Then security forces stole her body to prevent her family from holding a funeral. Another [case](#) involved 22-year-old Hadis Najafi, who was also protesting, and was killed by security forces in Karaj on September 21. Hadis' sister said she was shot in the head and neck with live ammunition and birdshot from a shotgun.

## **Domestic Violence, "Honor Killings," and Rape**

### *Domestic Violence and Honor Killings*

[Domestic violence is not a crime](#) under Iranian law (the regime generally views it as a private family matter). Criminal penalties for murder via domestic violence or "honor killings" are [lighter](#) than the penalties for other acts of murder. For example, men convicted of murdering their daughters are imprisoned for only three to 10 years, instead of receiving the standard sentence of capital punishment.

The Iranian parliament still has yet to enact draft legislation authored over nine years ago that would criminalize gender-based violence. After the bill languished in parliament for over five years, the Rouhani administration approved it in May 2017 and sent it to the judiciary for review, but Iran's chief justice then [sat on the bill](#) for two more years.

Finally, in September 2019, the judiciary cleared the legislation after [heavily amending and weakening](#) it. The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) criticized the revised bill because it "does not provide effective and sufficient guarantees to protect women against violence and, in many cases, promotes and supports stereotypical, discriminatory, and sexist views toward women." The CHRI notes that, among other problems, the measure:

- does not clearly define the term "violence" and does not use the term "domestic violence";

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- does not remove legal and enforcement obstacles to protect women from and prosecute their abusers;
- only requires abusive husbands to provide financial support for their wives for three months after they separate, thereby encouraging battered women to return to their abusive spouses;
- requires women who seek justice in the courts after being battered or sexually abused by their husbands or fathers to go through a one-month required period of reconciliation with their abusers, during which time the case is referred to a dispute-resolution body; and
- prevents an abused woman from getting a divorce on the grounds of abuse until her husband is convicted three times of engaging in violence against her.

After more than one year of further delay, the cabinet approved a further-revised bill on January 3, 2021. [Human Rights Watch states](#), “While a step forward in providing legal definitions surrounding violence against women and measures to support victims, the bill lacks provisions for criminalizing marital rape and child marriage.” The bill awaits further action by the parliament.

The government does not report official statistics about honor killings, but academic research indicates that an estimated 375 to 450 honor killings are committed each year. In 2020, 14-year-old Romina Ashrafi was [beheaded by her father](#) for running off with her 29-year-old boyfriend. Fathers who kill their children are subject to a maximum of 10 years in prison, while mothers who do so are liable to the death penalty. Due to national outrage about the beheading, Iran’s Guardian Council okayed a law that criminalized emotional or physical child abuse or abandonment but [did not modify](#) the 10-year maximum prison sentence for a father who kills his daughter. In August 2020, Romina Ashrafi’s father was [sentenced to nine years imprisonment](#).

## *Rape*

[Marital rape is legal](#) in Iran. Iranian law de facto also deters most victims of non-marital rape from reporting to the authorities. Rape victims who come forward can face prosecution for crimes such as adultery (punishable by execution), “indecent,” or “immoral behavior.” Accused rapists can only be convicted upon the testimony of multiple witnesses (four Muslim men or a greater number of a combination of male and female witnesses). Reportedly, about 80 percent of cases of rape are not reported.

Zahra Navidpour, a woman who had [accused](#) of rape Salman Khodadadi, a former IRGC commander and former chair of the parliament’s Social Affairs Committee, was found dead in her home under mysterious circumstances in January of 2019. Also, in 2019, former Iranian vice

president and former Tehran mayor Mohammad Ali Najafi confessed to and was [convicted](#) of murdering one of his wives. However, her family waived the application of the death penalty.

In June 2018, international media reported on [protests](#) surrounding the gang rape of at least 41 women and girls in the city of Iranshahr, a predominantly Baluchi province. The regime allegedly sought to deny the cases, in which some of the perpetrators reportedly had ties to Iranian security forces. Online activists who sought to publicize the situation on social media faced harassment and arrest for their activities.

The regime has downplayed the frequency of rape. In 2011, now-[President Ebrahim Raisi](#), then deputy chief justice, [claimed](#), “Today in our society, there is more safety for women than in Western society. We have the most secure situation in the world and this is not contradicted by corrupt individuals committing acts that are in violation of sharia as such instances are quickly investigated.”

### **Sexual Exploitation of Girls**

Under Iranian law, a girl may be legally married at [13 years old](#) (compared with 15 for a boy), or even younger if her father or grandfather agrees, and a judge assents. Regime figures [reveal](#) over 40,000 registered marriages of children in Iran—including over 300 girls under age 14—and the United Nations has [expressed concern](#) about the increasing number of marriages of girls ten or younger.

In recent years, there have been [efforts](#) by women lawmakers to raise the age of marriage. However, measures to that effect have languished in parliament, despite endorsement by some leading clerics like Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi.

### **Disproportionate Judicial Punishment**

Under the Iranian penal code, the age of criminal responsibility for women is just [nine lunar years](#), compared with 15 lunar years for men. Women receive harsher punishments than men for several crimes, including adultery (which is liable to the death penalty). Most sentences of death by stoning for adultery are leveled against women.

Iranian family law also [increases women’s exposure to prosecution for adultery](#). Men are allowed to have up to four wives and an unlimited number of “temporary wives,” while a woman is limited to one husband, and divorces are far easier to obtain for men than for women. Husbands need not cite a reason for divorce, while wives are only entitled to divorces if their husbands sign contracts to that effect; cannot provide for their families; have otherwise violated their marriage contracts; or are impotent, insane, or addicted to drugs.

## Crackdown on Women's Rights Activists

Iranian authorities continue to harass, interrogate, detain, and imprison women's rights activists, sometimes accusing them of national-security crimes like espionage and collaboration with foreign powers to overthrow the regime. The government prohibits some women's rights activists from traveling abroad.

Since 2018, the regime has detained dozens of individuals for protesting mandatory head-covering. The activists have faced charges that include "inciting prostitution and corruption." One of the activists, [Shaparak Shajarizadeh](#), was sentenced to two years in prison and an 18-year suspended sentence after prolonged detention in which she was reportedly tortured and beaten and put in solitary confinement. Shajarizadeh, who fled Iran after her sentencing, claims she was told that she would serve her entire 20-year sentence if she engaged in further activism. In August 2019, a revolutionary court sentenced another hijab protester, [Saba Kordafshari](#), to 24 years imprisonment.

In April 2019, the authorities [arrested](#) Yasaman Aryani, her mother, Monireh Arabshahi, and Mojgan Keshavarz after posting an International Women's Day video showing them walking without headscarves in the subway system. In August, a revolutionary court sentenced the three to 16, 16, and 23 years in prison, respectively, for "spreading propaganda against the system" and "inciting corruption and prostitution." An appeals court [reaffirmed their sentences](#) in February 2020.

### *Nasrin Sotoudeh*

In June 2018, the regime arrested prominent human rights lawyer [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), who had represented Shajarizadeh, reportedly telling her that she had been sentenced in absentia to a five-year prison sentence for espionage and endangering Iranian national security. Critics of the Iranian regime allege that the charges were a pretext and that Iran's government targeted her for representing political prisoners and women protesting Iran's compulsory hijab law.

In March 2019, Sotoudeh's husband, Reza Khandan, [announced](#) that the regime had opaquely reached additional verdicts against her and that her complete sentence was "a total of 38 years imprisonment with 148 lashes, five years in jail for the first case and 33 years in prison with 148 lashes on the second charges." Sotoudeh was previously imprisoned from 2010 to 2013 for purported crimes against national security and Iran's political system. Khandan himself was [sentenced](#) in January 2019 to six years imprisonment for "conspiring against national security" and "propaganda against the system" through his public advocacy for his wife. He remains free on appeal.



Masih Alinejad

In September 2019, the regime [arrested](#) three relatives of Masih Alinejad, who founded the movement to protest mandatory head-covering. Some of them were put in solitary confinement, according to reports. The authorities reportedly later released one of the three relatives after interrogating him and warned him that contact with Alinejad or “her team” was a crime. In March 2019, the regime interrogated Alinejad’s elderly mother for two hours and videotaped the session.

In June 2019, Alinejad posted to social media a video of plainclothes police dragging away a 15-year-old girl for refusing an order to cover her head. Police later confirmed the arrest.

The authorities have [cracked down](#) on activists protesting “acid attacks,” in which assailants throw acid on women who purportedly engaged in “immoral” behavior. One such activist, Alieh Motalebzadeh was sentenced to two years imprisonment on October 11, 2020, for “conspiracy against state security” through her advocacy. The regime also [arrested and prosecuted](#) Negar Masoudi, a photographer and documentary filmmaker, for holding an exhibition of photos of acid attack victims and [urging](#) that the purchase and sale of acid be prohibited. She was tried for “propaganda against the regime” and “conspiring against national security.”

### **Compulsory Gender Segregation**

Iranian law requires women and men to sit in separate areas in [public transportation](#), at [public weddings](#), and in [university classes](#); to attend [separate schools](#) (even preschools); and to use [separate entrances](#) to some airports, universities, and public buildings. Women generally may not attend men’s sporting events—such as soccer matches—in public stadiums.

### **Denial of Political, Economic, and Cultural Opportunities**

#### *Political Opportunities*

Iran is ranked fifth worst in “Political Empowerment” of women among the 146 countries covered in the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) [2022 Global Gender Gap Report](#).

In practice, women are not allowed to serve in the uppermost ranks of Iran’s leadership, including as supreme leader or as members of the Guardian Council. The Council continues to [disqualify](#) women who register as presidential candidates, including [all 40](#) who sought to run in the 2021 election. Women are also [prohibited](#) from serving as judges.

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[No women](#) serve in the cabinet of President Raisi, nor as deputy ministers. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, only one woman has been a cabinet minister (the health minister from 2009 to 2013). Just one of Iran's [12 vice presidents](#), who are less powerful than cabinet ministers, is a woman. **Only 16 women** serve in Iran's 290-member parliament, and the Guardian Council disqualifies thousands of prospective candidates from running in legislative elections.

## *Economic Opportunities*

Iran is ranked second-worst in “Economic Participation and Opportunity” for women—ahead of only Afghanistan and Pakistan—among the 146 countries covered in the WEF's aforementioned [2022 Global Gender Gap Report](#).

The percentage of women that constitute the Iranian workforce has languished in the mid-teens for years, while the official [unemployment rate](#) for women—around 20 percent—is about double that for men. Actual levels of unemployment are likely much higher. The Iran International news website has reported that the government's definition of being employed includes people who work as little as [one hour a week](#).

The Iranian regime [bars](#) women from working in some government departments, including the Judiciary Organisation of Military Forces. **Iranian law gives husbands control over their wives' ability to work.** In some cases, husbands are legally allowed to block their wives from employment, and some employers will not hire women without their husbands' consent. Men may also prevent their wives from traveling abroad. Women often must not travel without a male guardian or chaperone and risk being harassed if they travel alone.

Iranian law provides insufficient protection for women against workplace sexual harassment. The law also does not bar discrimination in hiring on the basis of sex.

**The regime also restricts women from pursuing almost 80 majors, ranging from engineering, computer science, and nuclear physics to business and English literature.**

## *Cultural Opportunities*

The government frequently censors publications critical of the Islamic Republic and removes material regarding women's rights. The regime also censors or bans movies that it believes would spread subversive ideas about the rights of women.

## **Unequal Treatment in Family and Inheritance Law**

Iranian family and inheritance laws generally favor men over women.

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As noted above, men may have up to four wives—and enter into an unlimited number of “[temporary marriages](#)”—while women are only allowed one husband. A female virgin of any age wishing to marry requires the permission of her father or grandfather or a court. Men may divorce their wives for any reason or none at all, while women only have the right to divorce under certain conditions. Muslim women, unlike Muslim men, may not marry non-Muslims.

In divorce cases, Iranian law generally grants custody of children seven and older to their fathers, while women are usually granted custody of children until the latter turns seven.

Women require their husbands’ permission to obtain a passport and travel abroad. Husbands are legally allowed to determine where the family lives and to prevent their wives from engaging in certain vocations.

A law enacted in 2020 [offers the possibility of Iranian citizenship](#) for the children of Iranian women married to non-citizens. Previously, only male Iranians were entitled to pass their citizenship to their children.

However, even under the new law, citizenship for children born of Iranian women and foreign husbands [is not automatically given](#)—women must apply for citizenship for their children, or the children may themselves apply after turning 18. Applicants must be screened for “security problems” and cleared by the intelligence ministry and the intelligence branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, meaning that children of parents viewed as critical of the regime could be denied citizenship.

By law, upon the death of a childless man, his widow is [entitled](#) to inherit only one-quarter of his estate. If he has children, the widow’s share is reduced to one-eighth. A widower, by contrast, inherits one-half of his childless wife’s property and one-quarter if she has children. If a man had multiple wives, the standard widow’s inheritance is divided equally among them.

Similarly, while a man is legally entitled to inherit all forms of property in the event of his wife’s death, a widow only has the right to inherit a portion of the value of her husband’s land—not the land itself. Consequently, other inheritors may pay the widow her share of the land’s value and then evict her from the property.

Each son of a deceased person inherits twice as much as each daughter.

*Sources (unless otherwise noted):* U.S. Department of State, United Nations, Freedom House, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.