

Iran's War on Women

The Iranian regime continues to discriminate systematically against women, treating them as second-class citizens. Tehran enables violence against women and sexual exploitation of girls; harasses, jails, fines, and flogs women for crimes like appearing in public without covering their hair and bodies; forcibly segregates women from men; disproportionately punishes women in the judicial system; cracks down on activists for women's rights; denies women political and economic opportunities; and favors men over women in family and inheritance law.

Violence

The Iranian regime has failed to combat the epidemic of violence against women in that country. After languishing in Iran's parliament for years, draft legislation to criminalize gender-based violence was approved by the Rouhani administration in May 2017, but Iranian Chief Justice Sadeq Larijani [has yet to sign off](#) on the bill. Iranian women's rights activists claim that the judiciary plans to strike provisions that expand the definition of violence beyond battery to include among other things, emotional abuse and restrictions on a woman's freedom of movement.

Iranian law de facto deters most rape victims from reporting their assault. 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). [Marital rape is legal](#).

[Domestic violence is not a crime](#) under Iranian law and criminal penalties for murder as a result of 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.

Sexual Exploitation of Girls

Under Iranian law, girls may be legally married at [13 years old](#) (compared with 15 for boys), or even younger if their respective fathers or grandfathers agree 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 10 or younger.

In an effort to push back against international criticism, the Statistical Center of Iran recently [published](#) a report arguing that the average age of marriage for both men and women increased by 39 months during the past four decades. In recent years, there have been [efforts](#) by women lawmakers to increase the age of marriage, but they have languished in parliament, despite endorsement by some leading clerics like Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi.

Forced Covering

Women who fail to wear headscarves and other attire covering their bodies in public may be harassed by the morality police, detained, or fined, and/or flogged. Many Iranians have expressed opposition to this policy, 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 via trying protesters for the crimes of [“inciting corruption and prostitution”](#) under article 639 of the [Islamic Penal Code](#). As noted below, since December 2017, the regime has arrested at least 35 women protesting mandatory head-covering.

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.

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.

Since December 2017, the regime has [arrested more than 35 women](#) for removing their headscarves to protest legally mandated 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 a 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 June 2018, the regime arrested prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, reportedly telling her that she would serve a five-year prison sentence. Sotoudeh was previously imprisoned from 2010 to 2013 for purported crimes against national security and Iran's political system.

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.

Restricted Political Opportunities

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 Iranian Guardian Council. The Council continues to disqualify women who register as presidential candidates, including all 137 who sought to run in the 2017 elections. Women are also [prohibited](#) from serving as judges.

[No women](#) have served in the cabinet of purportedly moderate President Hassan Rouhani. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 only one woman has served as a cabinet minister. [Three](#) of Iran's 12 vice presidents, who are less powerful than cabinet ministers, are women. Only [17 women](#) serve in Iran's 290-member parliament.

Restricted Economic Opportunities

Iran is ranked among the worst five countries in the world for gender equality, including equal participation in the economy, in the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap report](#).

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 block their wives from traveling abroad.

Consequently, the percentage women constitute of the Iranian workforce has languished in the mid-teens for years, while the [unemployment rate](#) for women—around 20 percent—is about double that for men.

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.

Unequal Treatment in Family and Inheritance Law

Iranian family and inheritance laws generally favor men over women.

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 require her male guardian’s permission to marry. Men may divorce their wives for any reason or none at all, while women only have the right to divorce under certain conditions.

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 turn 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.

The children of Iranian women married to non-citizens are not entitled to Iranian citizenship, while male Iranians married to foreign nationals have the right to pass their citizenship to their children.

By law, upon the death of a man without children, his wife is [entitled](#) to inherit only one-quarter of his estate. If he has children, the wife’s share is reduced to a mere eighth. If a man had multiple wives, this inheritance is divided equally among them. Sons are entitled to inherit twice as much as daughters.

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’ 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.

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