Human Rights Protection of Women in the Iran Islamic Republic: Are Fundamental Human Rights of Azerbaijani Women in the Iran Islamic Republic protected?

14 days of demonstrations
- Anti-government protest
- Pro-government rally
- Densely populated area

Sources: Storyful (protests); Oak Ridge National Laboratory's LandScan (population)

Map of protests taking place in Iran. Photo credit: The Wall Street Journal

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**Introduction**

Women, who make up approximately half of every community, hold a special position and status within every social structure, including the family. Women have the potential and strength to give birth; raise able-minded, confident, and happy generations; and sometimes sacrifice their comfort for their children. Recognizing the need to protect women from the vulnerabilities imposed by this responsibility, Islam has assigned certain special rights to women and imposed protective measures to safeguard them. In addition to this, women have other standards placed upon them by God and society. For example, though respect for women is a staple of the Muslim identity, in today’s world, modern civilization has degraded women by making them vehicles for such concepts as profit maximization, consumer marketing, and sexual tools.

Furthermore, women’s identity as human beings has been eroded, converting them into mere symbols of temptation. This inhumane approach and attitude towards women have grave effects on society as a whole. The family, the smallest and most fundamental unit of any society, and therefore of every civilization, has been disproportionately damaged. Women have suffered through legal, economic, social, cultural, and political discrimination.

Discriminatory laws; biased trials; the non-compliance of laws based on freedoms, habits, and traditions that ignore modern civilization; and patriarchal principles lead to human rights abuses against women. Laws, regulations, and practices perpetuating unequal treatment of men and women under state jurisdiction are, in essence, a result of disbelief in the equal status of men and women and the deep exploitation of women, who are forced to live under degrading, restrictive conditions.

Although the ideas of modern civilization and democracy regarding the equality of men and women under the law mask such behavior, in practice, the governing system submits to a series of political, economic, military, and strategic balances at the national level, which hamper the realization of the ideas in modern thought and civilization.

The Iranian government’s nationalist attitudes, discriminatory practices, and backward dealing with women’s issues (especially those related to sexual discrimination) are evident in every aspect of life in Iran. Starting at the beginning of the women’s struggle for rights in Iran, the community addressed the issue of equality between men and women, which was evident in women’s requests
for education and parliamentary rights. Past research demonstrated that Azerbaijani women in the province of East Azerbaijan faced more discrimination than Persian women. Such inequalities include lower access to education and inadequate political representation. Prior research also indicates that there are regular cases of discrimination in access to opportunities and the compensation of preservice teachers. In a 2020 study, access to education of female students was investigated, comparing the qualities and personal characteristics of female students of two traditional associations, Shushtarani and Tavallodi, and a Western group, Urmia (Aliyev, Seufullali, Saidova, Musayev, 2020).

Violence against Women in Iran

There is a remarkable increase in violence towards women in closed societies and countries where there is armed conflict, little to no feminist movements, and predominantly Muslim communities. Violation of women’s human rights, including Islamic teachings of gender equality, presents the biggest obstacle to reaching freedom and democracy. In the earlier documents, it was pointed out that there were serious limitations in Islamic countries' legislations, and gender discrimination was
observed in every stage of social life. Parallel to the increase in violence towards women in general, human rights defenders are concerned by the increasing convictions of Azerbaijani activists (Rehof, 2021).

Depriving women of their fundamental rights includes ignoring the education of a woman, depriving them of work, gender-based violence, compulsory marriage, marriage with the father's commands, and violent debates about chastity and honor. These instances are most often seen within family-related violence and apply to emotional harassment and such as dignity. Women subjected to these inhuman conditions often attempt suicide.

There are many international and domestic principles and regulations on the prevention of gender-based violence. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which came into force in 1981, attempt to quell gender-based violence and discrimination. In male-dominated societies, experts undertake various actions to prevent gender discrimination and violence toward women. Across the globe, there has been an increase in the number of executions after 2001, intimidating forms of violence against women, and reactions and approaches towards violence against women. However, the suspension of national regulations and international principles due to various disputes on crimes and the preservation of silence on these kinds of crimes lead to an increase in violence against women.

**Human Rights Violation of Azerbaijani Women in Iran**

This issue is not only relevant in Azerbaijan but is also important internationally. The Human Rights Campaign has reported the mass transfer of nomadic women from the area of Astara Valley lying along the southern border of Azerbaijan to Iran under the pretext of receiving an Islamic upbringing there in September 2009. The Human Rights Organization’s goal is to examine the complexity of the issue, the historical conditionality, and the international law problems, and also to indicate the ways of its solution. With the practical goal of defending the rights of women, the report details base measures that need to be taken by the state bodies in this direction (Saffari, 2022).
Official statistics reveal the appalling treatment of Iranian women compared to men in areas of employment. By far, fewer women are economically active in Iran than anywhere else in the world. In the early twentieth century, women received somewhat favorable treatment under the civil code of Iran; practically, however, the rules were only honored among elite families. After the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1924, when Reza Shah Pahlavi pursued modernization, following the example of Turkey, the compulsory hijab was prohibited and employment opportunities for women increased. Subsequent rapid countrywide encroachments on hijab use transformed the educated women elite into a small minority.

Employment opportunities have been curtailed for Azerbaijani women in Iran through discriminatory treatment from the very inception of the Islamic Republic. On March 7, 1979, only two weeks after the founding of the Islamic Republic, the government announced that women should return home, and the historic day became known as the National Day of Hijab. At once, national television ratified the new government's policy which discriminated against women in
employment: only unmarried women or widows were allowed to work and women who worked outside the home faced the risk of assault if they did not cover their heads with chadar. Moreover, the new government immediately increased the eligibility age for government-funded retirement benefits for women, which was five years ahead of men’s.

In Tehran, the capital of Iran, the participation of Azerbaijani women in the 11th presidential elections was reportedly very low compared to other provinces. But it was the lowest in the Urmia region. Local news agencies reported that during the 2013 election, more than 6,000 people from the province were present but there was only one. The woman was in the Pol-e-Sefid region (Kurd-Ahmadi). Women's participation in various elections in Iran continues to be low (Militz, 2020). On the one hand, the dress code and the practice of gender-segregated voting (men and women have to go to different voting booths) in the name of religious dogma are still in place. In addition, the electorate, in violation of their political rights, is manipulated by public employment, threats, coercion, and other kinds of violence.

In Iran, Azerbaijani and Persian women are hindered in political participation and face more obstacles because of the sexism that prevails in Iran. No woman was part of the 68 Election committee members in Pars Abad county. Turbo Khanim Naem Shahr is a town near Malakan, in the northwest of Iran. In Naem, Forough Khanimzada was the only woman among a total of 2438 candidates for municipal elections in the spring of 2017. But she was rejected because she was considered a prospective member of a prohibited party. The Ministry of Interior claimed that the applicants, including Forough Khanim, had signed the oath of loyalty to this unrecognized organization (Safarova, 2023).

Since the beginning of 2024, the Iranian government executed over 200 people. One of the most common torture methods of the government against political prisoners is limiting their access to medical supplies and assistance. South Azerbaijanis have a special amount of share among political prisoners subjected to such treatments. Nargiz Mohammed from Zanjan who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and detained in Tehran’s “Evin Prison”, suffered from heart failure. Nargiz Mohammed was not allowed to be transferred to the hospital, prohibited from meeting her family, and jailed indefinitely for an unknown reason. Similarly, 18-year-old Roya Zakiri from Tabriz was harassed by police forces in a public place for not observing the hijab rule and after, the video of her chanting the slogan “Death to Khomeini” was widely circulated on social media.
Access to Education

The UN officials have reported that the educational publications of schools where the main instruction is given in Azerbaijani language, including test questionnaires, are provided in Persian language. In comparison to Persian, Arabic, and Azerbaijani are taught much less to the students in Azerbaijani-populated regions. Azerbaijani children are thus taught in a foreign language, which negatively affects their academic success, and this prevents access to higher education for the majority of these students. This situation has been complained about several times by human rights defenders; however, its negative impact remains constant. Their application letters systematically remain unanswered by the security forces.

Security Council Call, notes, "Women living in less developed regions such as Iranian Azerbaijan, are more vulnerable to serious breaches of their human rights." According to the surveys of the UN and international organizations, ethnic minority women, even in the highest developed countries, generally face discrimination. A large number of Azerbaijani women, due to the economic hardship of their families, unwillingness of families to send girls to schools, and/or lack of access to elementary facilities are deprived of the right to education. The reports presented to the UN have also shown that Azerbaijani women who attended schools and universities similar to the government's administrative and military staff attended were expelled and subsequently prevented from attending the schools through the policies of savod, imposed at the beginning of the 20th century, and harsh oppressive fiscal policy, implemented since the 1980s by the Iranian authorities.
(Gulizada, 2023). It was also reported that the heads of families who insisted on sending the girls to school were arrested by security forces and tortured.

Since November 2022, the Iranian regime has kept silent about the poisoning of girls in the girls’ schools operating in regions with dense Muslim populations. Failure to take any effective measures against this act of terrorism by Iran’s law enforcement agencies gives rise to reasonable doubts about the implication of Iran’s state authorities in the poisoning incidents. As a result of such government actions, parents are afraid of sending their daughters to school. In other words, there is a danger of a class of Azerbaijani women who are illiterate, unable to demand their rights, and not considered a potential risk to the security of the regime in the future.

Conclusion

There is a long history of human rights violations and protection of Azerbaijani women who live in Iran. Numerous NGOs and Western countries have been following reports from UN rapporteurs and human rights in Iran in recent years. The expectations and hopes are that the international public will work toward achieving the freedom of the innocent women who are kept in legal limbo, cannot meet their families, and are punished gravely in unsanitary prisons in Iran under the Islamic Republic of Iran’s rule.
Antigovernment protests after the death of Mahsa Amini in Tabriz, September 2022. Photo: WikiCommons