



IRAN

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN COMMUNICATIONS PROCEDURE REGARDING REPRESSION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

INTRODUCTION

This submission to the Commission on the Status of Women (the Commission) is intended to draw the Commission's attention to the continuing pattern of human rights violations experienced by women human rights defenders in Iran in reprisal for their peaceful human rights activities. These activities include advocating for the abolition of the death penalty; promoting women's rights and opposing compulsory veiling (*hijab*); seeking truth, justice, and reparations on behalf of individuals who were summarily executed or forcibly disappeared during the 1980s and their families; and speaking out against the denial of access to higher education for members of Iran's Baha'i religious minority. The submission highlights the cases of seven women human rights defenders in this relation. As of August 2017, four of them were serving prison sentences in Tehran's Evin prison; two were sentenced to imprisonment; and one was undergoing trial.

Amnesty International requests that the Commission on the Status of Women's Working Group on Communications considers the information contained in the present submission with a view to its inclusion in the Commission's report to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), along with recommendations to the Iranian authorities.

INTENSIFIED CRACKDOWN ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 gave rise to hopes both in Iran and internationally that the human rights situation in the country would improve. However, over the course of his first term in office, Iran's human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders who were already struggling to recover from the 2009 post-presidential election crackdown, found themselves at the receiving end of suffocating levels of repression at the hands of the country's judiciary and security apparatus.¹

Women human rights defenders have faced renewed repression in the context of the endemic discrimination and violence confronting women and girls every day in Iran. Iran's intelligence bodies have used surveillance and criminal proceedings to prevent and suppress attempts by women's rights activists to organize themselves to challenge state-sanctioned discrimination. This has included the monitoring of activities undertaken during travel abroad.

¹ For more details, see Amnesty International, *Caught in a web of repression: Iran's human rights defenders under attack* ([Index: MDE 13/6446/2017](#)).

The renewed assault on women's rights activists has been accompanied by an official discourse which flatly equates feminism with criminality and describes any initiative relating to women's rights as a "conspiracy" against national security. This hostile attitude has been expressed not only toward women's rights defenders but even toward lone voices within the government of President Rouhani who have made modest efforts to improve the situation of women's rights in the country, such as the former Vice-President on Women and Family Affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi.

Women who oppose compulsory veiling (*hijab*) have also been subject to severe smear campaigns on state media. An illustrative example is the case of US-based Iranian journalist and women's rights activist **Masih Alinejad**, who has founded a popular online campaign called My Stealthy Freedom against compulsory hijab. State-sanctioned media outlets have published concocted articles describing her as a "whore" and claimed that she was "gang-raped after overdosing on cocaine and stripping naked in the streets." In June 2017, she also received a number of death threats from social media accounts believed to be affiliated with Iran's intelligence and security forces.

Women human rights defenders targeted by the state also include those involved in Iran's growing movement against the death penalty. The authorities often accusing these human rights defenders of "threatening national security" or "defying Islam". Artists who have merely addressed death penalty issues in their art have also been criminalized.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN IRAN

1. NARGES MOHAMMADI

Human rights activist Narges Mohammadi, 45, has been imprisoned in Evin prison since her arrest in May 2015. She is the Executive Chairperson of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders. The authorities told her that she was arrested to resume serving a six-year prison sentence from 2011 which stemmed solely from her peaceful human rights activities at the Centre for Human Rights Defenders. However, she believes that her arrest was in reprisal for a meeting that she and a group of leading women's rights activists had with Catherine Ashton, the then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, at the Austrian embassy in Tehran on International Women's Day on 8 March 2014.

After her meeting with the EU High Representative on 8 March 2014, Narges Mohammadi faced increased harassment and intimidation. She was repeatedly summoned by Ministry of Intelligence officials for long, intensive interrogations and threatened with imprisonment on national security-related charges. In November 2014, she wrote an open letter to President Rouhani, explaining how, during her interrogations, Ministry of Intelligence interrogators bombarded her with questions related to her involvement with various civil society groups, including the Women's Citizenship Centre (*Kanoon Shahrivandi Zanan*), a civil society organization which seeks to eliminate discrimination and violence against women. She has said: "The direction in which the interrogations were being taken showed me that, in reality, the focus of the security bodies is on eliminating civil society."

In her letter to President Rouhani, Narges Mohammadi also noted that she was intensely interrogated about her participation in the peaceful protests staged outside of government buildings calling on the authorities to investigate a string of acid attacks on women in the city of Esfahan, central Iran, in October 2014. She wrote: "The question that arises is why, instead of interrogating and detaining those responsible for acid attacks, the security bodies are targeting those who are protesting against the horrific crimes committed against the women of this country. Is it the case that either way, women should be the victims of violence, first as victims of acid attacks and then as [peaceful] protesters against acid attacks?" After her meeting with the EU High Representative on 8 March 2014, Narges Mohammadi also became the subject of smear campaigns in state media. For example, on 12 March 2014, conservative MP Fatemeh Rahbar, head of the Women and Family Coalition of Parliament, penned an open letter to the former EU High Representative

suggesting that Narges Mohammadi had taken up “armed struggle against the Islamic Republic of Iran”.² State-sanctioned media outlets such as Mashregh News, which is affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, described her as “a seditionist activist”.³

Narges Mohammadi was ultimately sentenced to a new 16-year prison term in May 2016, following an unfair trial before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran which convicted her of “forming a group composed of more than two people with the purpose of disrupting national security”, “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security”, and “spreading propaganda against the system”. The first charge, which accounts for 10 years of her sentence, was brought in connection with her involvement with the Campaign for Step by Step Abolition of the Death Penalty, known by its Persian acronym Legam.

The “evidence” underlying her two other charges included her media interviews about human rights violations, her participation in peaceful gatherings outside prisons to support families of death row prisoners, her contact with other human rights defenders including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, her participation in peaceful protests to condemn acid attacks against women, and her 2014 meeting with Catherine Ashton. In September 2016, Branch 36 of the Court of Appeal in Tehran upheld the sentence. In April 2017, Iran's Supreme Court rejected her request for judicial review.

Narges Mohammadi reported that during her trial session, the judge was hostile and biased against her and openly defended the allegations brought against her by Ministry of Intelligence officials. She said the judge fiercely accused her of attempting to change “divine laws” (*ahkam-e elahi*) through her anti-death penalty activities. Narges Mohammadi added that the judge did not allow her to defend herself properly. He gave her three written questions and told her that she was only allowed to answer them in writing. She said that every time she tried to speak and expand on her answers, the judge ordered her to stop. Her lawyers were similarly told by the judge that they were not allowed to speak and that, if they wished to make a point, they could do so in writing.

2. ATENA DAEMI

Anti-death penalty campaigner Atena Daemi, 29, has been imprisoned in Evin prison since November 2016, serving a seven-year sentence for her peaceful human rights activities.

She was first arrested by Revolutionary Guard officials on 21 October 2014 and transferred to Section 2A of Evin prison, which is controlled by the Revolutionary Guards. For the first 28 days of detention, she was held in a cell which she said was infested with insects and had no toilet. With the exception of weekends, she was interrogated every day for a month and a half, often for 10 to 11 hours a day.

During most interrogations, she had to sit blindfolded, facing a wall. She was denied access to a lawyer during this entire period. In February 2015, she was released on bail.

She was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment in May 2015 after Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted her of “gathering and colluding against national security”, “spreading propaganda against the system”, “insulting the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Supreme Leader” and “concealing evidence”, all of them charges under the Islamic Penal Code. Her trial in March 2015, which was joint with three other activists, lasted about 45 minutes. The conviction rested on her posts on Facebook and Twitter opposing compulsory veiling (*hijab*) and criticizing the authorities' execution record as well as her participation in gatherings outside prison in solidarity with families of death row prisoners. Other “evidence” used against her included the distribution of anti-death penalty pamphlets, her visits to the gravesite of those killed during protests following the 2009 presidential election, and her association with human rights

² Mehrs News, “The letter of the head of the Women Coalition of Parliament to Ashton: Be honest and announce that those you visited were criminals convicted of armed opposition”, 12 March 2014, available at: goo.gl/SV6QdG (accessed 6 April 2017).

³ Mashregh News, “Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Intelligences must be accountable about Ashton's visit with seditionist activists”, 9 March 2014, available at: <https://goo.gl/JF8rau> (accessed 6 April 2017).

defenders and relatives of political prisoners. In September 2016, her sentence was reduced on appeal to seven years.

In a post on her Facebook page in October 2016, Arena Daemi wrote that she had been accused of “insulting Islam” and threatened with harsh penalties including the death penalty for peacefully speaking out against compulsory hijab: “The judge told me that my opposition to compulsory veiling was tantamount to opposing the clear rulings of the Qur’an and that I had insulted religious sanctities and my sentence should be the death penalty.” On 26 November 2016, plain-clothes Revolutionary Guard officials raided her parents’ house and took Atena Daemi to Evin prison to begin serving her sentence. In a letter leaked from prison on 1 December 2016, she said that she was beaten and pepper-sprayed by the officials arresting her after she insisted that they present an arrest warrant. She said that her sister was punched when she attempted to intervene and that, on the way to prison, the officials blindfolded her and repeatedly threatened her by saying that they would open new cases against her.

After her imprisonment, Atena Daemi filed a complaint with the Office of the Prosecutor against the Revolutionary Guards for the violent manner in which she was arrested, but this complaint was never processed. Instead, on 23 March 2017, a criminal court in Tehran sentenced her to three months and one day in prison for “insulting public officers on duty”. Her sisters Ensieh and Hanieh Daemi were convicted on the same charge with suspended prison sentences of three months and one day. On 31 May 2017, an appeal court in Tehran acquitted Atena Daemi and her sisters of the charge and quashed their sentences. Atena Daemi subsequently ended a 54-day hunger strike which she had launched on 8 April in protest at the harassment of her family members and the suspended prison sentence imposed on her sisters.

Atena Daemi is currently suffering from health complications as a result of her prolonged hunger strike, and the authorities are denied her the ongoing specialist medical care she requires outside of prison. Amnesty International is calling for her to receive specialized medical care outside prison pending her release. The organization research shows that the authorities deliberately deny political prisoners access to adequate medical care; in many cases as an intentional act of cruelty intended to intimidate and punish political prisoners, which includes deliberately delaying or refusing urgent and/or specialized medical care.⁴

3. GOLROKH EBRAHIMI IRAEE

Writer Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, 36, has been imprisoned in Evin prison since October 2016, serving a six-year prison sentence primarily for writing an unpublished story about the practice of stoning. The story describes the emotional reaction of a young woman who watches the film *The Stoning of Soraya M*, which is based on a true story. The young woman becomes so enraged that she burns a copy of the Qur’an. In March 2017, 30 months was reduced from her imprisonment sentence as part of a Nowrooz (Iranian New Year) pardon.

Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was initially arrested, without an arrest warrant, together with her husband Arash Sadeghi, also a human rights defender, on 6 September 2014 by Revolutionary Guard officials. She was held without access to her family and lawyer until 27 September 2014, before being released on bail. While detained, she was subjected to extended interrogations while blindfolded and repeatedly threatened with execution for “insulting Islam”.

Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment in August 2015, after two brief sessions before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, each lasting less than 15 minutes. She was tried without legal representation. The first lawyer she appointed was put under pressure to withdraw and the second was barred from reading her casefile and representing her. At the first hearing, she was not given the chance to speak in her own defence because the court focused on her husband’s activism and, at the

⁴ For more details, see Amnesty International, *Health taken hostage: cruel denial of medical care in Iran’s prisons* ([Index: MDE 13/4196/2016](#)).

second, she was in hospital recovering from major surgery. She provided the court with her medical records, but her request to adjourn the hearing was rejected.

Her husband, Arash Sadeghi, staged a 71-day hunger strike from 24 October 2016 to 3 January 2017 to protest against her imprisonment. Following a global outcry, the authorities were compelled to grant Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee temporary prison leave on 3 January 2017. However, after Arash Sadeghi ended his hunger strike, the Revolutionary Guards resorted to different punitive tactics. They obstructed the judicial review of the couple's case by Iran's Supreme Court by preventing the transfer of the court files from the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. Then, they rearrested and returned Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee to Evin prison on 22 January despite earlier promises to extend her prison leave until her case had gone through the judicial review process. In July 2017 her and her husband's request for judicial review was rejected by the Supreme Court.

4. ALIEH MOTALABZADEH

Women's rights activist and photojournalist Alieh Motalebzadeh was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in August 2017 after Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted her of "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security". The conviction stems solely from her peaceful women's rights activism.

Alieh Motalebzadeh was first arrested on 26 November 2016 by Ministry of Intelligence officials following weeks of harassment by the authorities after she returned to Iran from a workshop in Georgia on "Women's empowerment and elections". She was subsequently charged with "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" in relation to her attendance at the workshop and subjected to a travel ban.

She was held in solitary confinement in Section 209 of Evin prison until 19 December 2016, when she was released on bail. During this period, she was repeatedly interrogated about why she had attended the workshop and for details about the workshop's organizers.

She was denied access to her lawyer and allowed only one in-person family visit on 7 December in the presence of her interrogator. The interrogator used this visit to admonish Alieh Motalebzadeh's husband to "not make a fuss" in reference to his media interviews about his wife's arrest and detention. The interrogator also threatened her husband and daughter with arrest, and told her husband to stop conducting media interviews about his wife.

Amnesty International understands that the Ministry of Intelligence harassed and interrogated at least 13 other women who attended the workshop in Georgia.

Since her release, Alieh Motalebzadeh and her family are believed to be under heavy surveillance by the authorities.

5. ROUHIE SAFAJOO

Baha'i student Rouhie Safajoo, aged 20, was arrested on 8 March 2016 at her home in Karaj, north-west of Tehran, by eight Revolutionary Guard officials who introduced themselves as employees of the state gas company before entering the house. The officials told her that she was being arrested "in relation to her Facebook activities". They searched the house and asked her to provide the password to her personal accounts, including her email.

In the months leading up to her arrest, Rouhie Safajoo had written several posts on her Facebook account about the violation of her right to higher education and the discrimination she suffered as a Baha'i. Despite passing Iran's university entrance exam in 2014 and 2015, she had not been allowed to enrol. She had filed a complaint with several state authorities and had written, along with other Baha'i students, an open letter

to President Rouhani expressing dismay that his administration had not kept its promise to respect the rights of Baha'is to higher education and non-discrimination.

Following her arrest, Rouhie Safajoo was taken to Section 2A of Evin prison, where she was held in solitary confinement for eight days. She had no access to a lawyer during this period even though she was interrogated every day for four hours. She was not permitted to call her family until five days after her arrest.

During interrogations, she was blindfolded and forced to sit facing a wall. Her interrogators questioned her about her Facebook posts, repeatedly insulting her religious beliefs and calling her "mental", "brazen" and "stubborn". Rouhie Safajoo was released on 27 March 2016 after posting bail. She was subsequently summoned to the Office of the Prosecutor where she was charged with "dissemination of lies" under Article 18 of the Cyber Crimes Law. As of August 2017, she was at liberty awaiting her trial date.

6. MARYAM AKBARI MONFARED

Prisoner of conscience Maryam Akbari Monfared filed, from inside prison, a formal complaint with the Office of the Prosecutor in Tehran in October 2016, seeking an official investigation into the mass executions of several thousand political prisoners, including two of her siblings, in 1988; the location of the mass graves where their bodies were buried; and the identity of the perpetrators involved.

To date, the authorities have not processed the complaint. Instead, they have resorted to various punitive tactics. Since October 2016, they have refused to take her to her medical appointments outside prison to receive adequate treatment for her rheumatoid arthritis and thyroid problems. As a result, she is experiencing severe pain in her legs. They have also repeatedly threatened to stop her family visits. In May 2017, she was threatened with an additional three-year prison term and exile to a remote prison.

Maryam Akbari Monfared was arrested on 31 December 2009 and forcibly disappeared for five months. It later transpired that she had been held in solitary confinement for the first 43 days after her arrest, during which she was subjected to intense interrogations without access to a lawyer. She met her state-appointed lawyer for the first time at her trial, which was limited to one brief hearing lasting less than an hour. She was sentenced to 15 years in May 2010 after Branch 15 of a Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted her of "enmity against God" (*moharebeh*). The conviction was solely based on the fact that she had made phone calls to her relatives, who are members of the banned People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), and had visited them once in Iraq. Her husband has said that during her trial session, the judge told her she was paying for the activities of her relatives with the PMOI. Branch 33 of the Supreme Court upheld the sentence in August 2010.

7. MANSOUREH BEHKISH

Human rights activist Mansoureh Behkish, who lost six members of her family during the mass executions of the 1980s, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in January 2017 after a Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted her of "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system".

The conviction stems solely from her peaceful activities to seek truth and justice, including holding commemorative gatherings at her home; visiting the families of victims; taking flowers to Khavaran (a deserted mass gravesite in the south of Tehran), where two of her brothers are believed to be buried in unmarked graves; and posting about Iran's human rights violations on Facebook and other online platforms. Her conviction and sentence followed two interrogation sessions by Ministry of Intelligence officials during which she was denied the presence of a lawyer, and a trial session in late 2016 that lasted less than an hour. Since the 1980s, Mansoureh Behkish has been subjected to repeated harassment, arbitrary arrests and periods of detention by intelligence and security forces in attempts to silence her and stop her going to

Khavaran with flowers and pictures. She was given a suspended sentence of four years and six months in 2011 because of her human rights work, particularly with the Mothers and Families of Khavaran, which is comprised of mothers and other family members of political prisoners summarily executed during the 1980s in Iran as well as the Mothers of Laleh Park, which is largely comprised of women whose children were killed, detained or forcibly disappeared in the post-election violence in 2009.¹⁰⁸ If her latest sentence is upheld on appeal, the suspended sentence may be activated and she would face up to 12 years in prison.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE IRANIAN AUTHORITIES

Amnesty International urges the Commission on the Status of Women to make the following recommendations to the Iranian authorities:

- Release immediately and unconditionally Narges Mohammadi, Atena Daemi, Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, Maryam Akbari Monfared and all other human rights defenders imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression, association and assembly through their human rights work.
- Quash, without delay, the criminal convictions and sentences issued against Alieh Motalebzadeh, Mansoureh Behkish and other human rights defenders, which stem from their peaceful human rights work.
- Ensure that the criminal justice system is not misused to target or harass human rights defenders and refrain from bringing criminal charges or any other punitive proceedings against human rights defenders that stem solely from the peaceful exercise of their human rights.
- Ensure that all women human rights defenders are protected from all forms of intimidation, harassment and reprisal, in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and that the principles contained in the Declaration are fully incorporated into national law.
- Publicly recognize, in law and practice and across all three branches of the government, the legitimate work of women human rights defenders in Iran, and end the use of derogatory terms such as “sluts”, “deviant”, “corrupt”, “spies”, and “traitors” which demean and degrade these women
- Ensure women human rights defenders have access to the specific protection they need against gender-based threats and violence they may face due to their work.
- Take all necessary legislative and other measures to prevent, deter and punish acts of intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders in relation to their communications and interactions with international and regional organizations.
- Uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and lift all obstacles to the registration of independent human rights organizations.
- Investigate promptly, independently and impartially all reports of torture and other ill-treatment of women detainees and prisoners and bring to justice anyone found responsible for such abuses.
- Ensure that all prisoners, including Narges Mohammadi, Atena Daemi, Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, and Maryam Akbari Monfared, are granted access to adequate medical care.

- Repeal Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code to abolish compulsory veiling (*hijab*), which violates women's rights to freedom of belief and religion, freedom of expression and the principle of equality and non-discrimination.
- Review as a matter of urgency all legislation in Iran in order to identify and remedy all laws that discriminate directly against women or have a discriminatory impact on women.