

Women. Life. Freedom: A Tribute to Mahsa Amini

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Mahsa Amini's passing last month has spurred a new age of protest, inspiring countless Iranians to revolt against the Islamic Republic. On September 13, 2022, Amini was arrested at a train station in Tehran while traveling with her brother for allegedly wearing her hijab too loosely around her head.¹ She was detained by the country's Morality Police and taken to a re-education detention center to receive training on the state's veiling laws.² Three days later, however, she passed away in police custody.³ Iranian officials claim Amini's death was due to cardiac arrest induced by pre-existing conditions, but her family and thousands of protesters around the country believe the government played a direct role in her death.¹

To contextualize the story of Mahsa Amini, it is important to understand the history behind Iran's mandatory veiling laws for women. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran established the Morality Police to ensure that people's public attire was in accordance with Islamic Sharia law.⁴ In 1983, four years after the country's Islamic Revolution, Parliament passed a law requiring all women, both Iranian and foreign, to wear a hijab in public.⁵ Over the past

few decades, these laws became increasingly strict, with levels of punishment for violation ranging from fines to imprisonment.⁵ Since 2018, however, instead of imprisonment or fines, women have been forced to attend Islamic education classes.⁵ Even so, women continue to face harsh punishment under such ambiguous laws and subjective enforcement—such is the case with Mahsa Amini. Yet the question remains: who was she and why did she inspire a whole nation to stand against its religious autocracy?

Amini was born to a Kurdish family in Saqqez, a town in western Iran.⁶ Her original Kurdish name was Jina, meaning "life," but due to Iran's policy which mandates that official documents be written in Persian, she was given the Iranian name "Mahsa."⁶ Though she would come to be a symbol for millions, Amini was otherwise a normal young adult going about her daily life. She was never politically active and was described as being shy and reserved by the people close to her.⁷ Amini did not go out of her way to directly challenge the country's oppressive policies, yet she still found herself the victim of its brutality.⁷

Following Amini's passing,

protests began in her home village and quickly spread across the country.⁸ Now, over two months later, these demonstrations have only intensified.⁸ Simultaneously, state sanctioned violence has persisted in the country; according to a recent *CNN* article, approximately 378 people have died since mid-September.¹⁵ Attempts by security forces to quell these protests have directly caused the deaths of a number of Iranian women; among those killed include Nika Shakarmi (16), Sarina Esmailzadeh (16), Mahsa Mougouyi (18), Hannaneh Kia (22), Hadis Najafi (23), Ghazaleh Chelabi (33), and Minoo Majidi (62).⁹ Many of these women were shot or beaten by security forces, both in Tehran and around the country.⁹ Some have drawn parallels between this year's uprisings and the 2019 Iranian protests that emerged over rising fuel prices.⁶ It is imperative to differentiate them, however; while previous movements have been economically motivated, this one is rooted in women's rights.⁶ In the face of such adversity, a popular slogan has arisen: "Woman. Life. Freedom."⁹

This call has been heard all over the world. In an act of solidarity, women inside and outside of Iran have been cutting



off their hair in protest.¹⁰ This act ties back to the historical and cultural Persian belief that cutting one's hair is a symbol of resistance and mourning.¹¹ Across the globe, hundreds of women have participated in this tradition, either during demonstrations or on social media.¹² Several political figures and celebrities have also taken part, including EU Parliament member Abir Al-Sahlani and Oscar winning actress Marion Cotillard.¹²

Even under continued internal and external pressure, it does not seem that the Islamic Republic is willing to accept accountability for Amini's death. In October of this year, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei unfoundedly accused the United States and Israel for inciting protests in Iran.¹³ On October 26, 40 days after Amini's death, thousands of protestors and mourners visited her grave in Saqqez.¹⁴ Security forces responded by firing live rounds and tear gas into the crowd.¹⁴

What lays in the future for Iran regarding its veiling laws is unclear, but the death of Mahsa Amini points to the much larger systemic issue of governments policing women's bodies. The choice of how much or how little to cover oneself is not universally afforded to women around the world. Amini was a victim of a perpetual cycle that misconstrues societal values, religion, and law to control women's behavior, appearance, and presence. As calls for justice are made around the world, may her passing spark the change that ends these oppressive systems.

Women. Life. Freedom.

