

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

6 March 2024

Iran: Draconian campaign to enforce compulsory veiling laws through surveillance and mass car confiscations

Iranian authorities are waging a large-scale campaign to enforce repressive compulsory veiling laws through widespread surveillance of women and girls in public spaces and mass police checks targeting women drivers, said Amnesty International ahead of International Women's Day.

Tens of thousands of women have had their cars arbitrarily confiscated as punishment for defying Iran's veiling laws. Others have been prosecuted and sentenced to flogging or prison terms or faced other penalties such as fines or being forced to attend "morality" classes.

Testimonies from 46 individuals – 41 women, including a trans woman, one girl and four men – collected by Amnesty International in February 2024, coupled with a review of official documents including court verdicts and prosecution orders, indicate that a plethora of state agencies are involved in persecuting women and girls for simply exercising their rights to bodily autonomy and freedom of expression and belief. The organization has released [excerpts](#) of 20 of the testimonies to provide a glimpse into the frightening daily reality faced by women and girls in Iran.

"In a sinister attempt to wear down resistance to compulsory veiling in the wake of the 'Woman Life Freedom' uprising, Iran's authorities are terrorizing women and girls by subjecting them to constant surveillance and policing, disrupting their daily lives and causing them immense mental distress. Their draconian tactics span from stopping women drivers on the road and carrying out mass confiscation of their vehicles to imposing inhumane flogging and prison sentences," said Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"The intensifying persecution of women and girls is taking place just weeks before the UN Human Rights Council is set to vote on extending a Fact-Finding Mission with a mandate to investigate violations since the death in custody of Mahsa/Jina Amini, particularly against women and children. Member states of the UN Human Rights Council must tackle the crisis of impunity for attacks on women and girls,

by ensuring that an independent international mechanism continues to collect, consolidate and analyze evidence, with a view to future legal proceedings.”

Enforcers of degrading compulsory laws include the Moral Security Police (*police amniat-e akhlaghi*), traffic police, prosecution offices, courts, the Ministry of Intelligence and the Revolutionary Guards, as well as Basiji paramilitary force and other agents in plain clothes.

Persecuted for not wearing mandatory headscarves in cars

[Official announcements](#) indicate that since April 2023, Iran’s Moral Security Police have [ordered](#) the arbitrary confiscation of hundreds of thousands of vehicles with female drivers or passengers as young as nine without or in “inappropriate” headscarves. According to testimonies, such orders are based on pictures captured by surveillance cameras or reports from plain clothes agents patrolling the streets and using a police app, called Nazer to report license plates of vehicles with non-compliant female drivers or passengers.

The women targeted and their relatives have received threatening text messages and phone calls, instructing them to report to the Moral Security Police to hand over their vehicles as punishment for defying compulsory veiling. Amnesty International reviewed screenshots of 60 such text messages issued over the past year to 22 women and men.

In recent months, the authorities have also conducted mass random car stops and checks, targeting women drivers on busy roads. Police officials pull over the women drivers and run their license plates through their system, and if marked for confiscation, they are forced to go to police stations, where their cars are impounded. Cranes are brought in to impound the cars of women who refuse to comply.

Amnesty International spoke to 11 women who [described](#) intimidating car chases and stops and sudden impoundments while going about their ordinary daily activities such as commuting to work, medical visits or school runs. They emphasized the police’s complete disregard for their safety, with some women left stranded on busy highways or in cities far from their hometown.

Women and men said that the process to retrieve their cars from the Moral Security Police involves long queues and degrading treatment from officials including gender-based insults and reprimands about the appearance of women and girls as young as nine as well as humiliating instructions to cover their hair and threats of flogging, imprisonment and travel bans.

In many cases, senior officials at the Moral Security Police order the car release after 15-30 days, once arbitrary payment fees for parking and crane transfers are settled and written undertakings to observe compulsory veiling are obtained from women and girls and/or their male relatives.

In other cases, the Moral Security Police refer women and girls to the prosecution authorities, noting successive reports of them not wearing headscarves in vehicles, and conditioning the release of their cars on prosecution orders.

Ill-treated and denied access to public places and services

Women also [described](#) to Amnesty International how their access to public transport, airports and banking services is regularly denied and conditioned upon them wearing a headscarf. Women detailed how state enforcers, especially at airports, denied access to women and girls in hats and scrutinized the length and fit of their sleeves, trousers and uniforms.

Women further described such encounters are routinely accompanied by verbal abuse, including gender-based insults and threats of prosecution. One woman also told the organization about an incident in late 2023 where an enforcer at a metro station in Tehran punched her 21-year-old cousin in the chest.

A 17-year-old girl told Amnesty International that her school principal temporarily suspended her after a CCTV camera captured her unveiled in a classroom, and threatened to report her to the Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards if she removed her headscarf again.

Unjust prosecutions and sentencing

Amnesty International learned about 15 women and a 16-year-old girl in seven provinces who were prosecuted solely for appearing without headscarves or for wearing “inappropriate” hijab, or hats while in their vehicles; in public places such as shopping malls, theatres, airports or metro; or in pictures posted on their social media accounts.

The scale of such prosecutions is hard to ascertain as authorities fail to publish statistics. However, a [statement](#) from the police chief of Qom province, Mohammad Reza Mirheidary, in January 2024, referring to 1,986 criminal cases in connection with compulsory veiling in Qom alone since March 2023, indicates that such cases are widely under-reported. One woman told Amnesty International that a judge pointed to a pile of some 30 or 40 cases on his desk, commenting that they were all related to compulsory veiling. Several other women said that prosecution and police officials lamented their heavy workload due to women’s resistance against compulsory veiling.

Amnesty International documented cases of four women who received prosecution orders demanding that they participate in up to five “morality” classes and avoid any “criminal” conduct for up to one year in order for the criminal case against them to be closed. One of the women told how the prosecution official running the class blamed the 40 women participants in the class for high divorce rates and reprimanded them for appearing “naked”.

The organization documented the cases of three other women who were sentenced to fines.

Another woman was ordered to write a letter expressing repentance and threatened with a fine.

Amnesty International reviewed a report from the Ministry of Intelligence, instructing the continued surveillance of the online activities of a woman artist, targeted for her Instagram posts.

At the time of publication, proceedings against six of the women whose cases Amnesty International documented were ongoing.

In addition to their penalties, prosecution authorities and judges threatened most women and girls with flogging and imprisonment, while one was threatened with death and another with sexual violence. The father of a 16-year-old girl told Amnesty International that during her trial, the judge of a juvenile court aggressively asked her why she did not observe compulsory veiling and threatened her with flogging and imprisonment. The girl was eventually acquitted but was forced to sign an undertaking at the Moral Security Police.

In January 2024, the authorities [implemented a flogging sentence of 74 lashes against Roya Heshmati](#) for appearing unveiled in public. In a testimony on her social media account, she recounted her flogging by a male official in the presence of a judge in a room she described as a “medieval torture chamber”.

Background

[A bill](#), which aims to codify and intensify the authorities’ assault on women and girls for defying compulsory veiling, is nearing adoption in Iran’s Parliament. In February 2024, President Ebrahim Raisi [formally accepted](#) the significant financial costs of implementing the proposed law, paving the path for the Guardian Council to approve the bill.