



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### FACTSHEET SGBV AGAINST RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROTESTERS IN IRAN

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#### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

*By Scott Weiner, Supervisory Policy Analyst*

## Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Religious Freedom Protesters in Iran

### Overview

Iran's government is using sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a tool of repression against Iranians seeking greater freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). For survivors of SGBV who are members of religious minority communities and societies where religion has a strong role in public life, SGBV often imposes unique harms in addition to physical and emotional trauma. Iranian authorities' use of SGBV is designed to turn survivors' religious beliefs against them to generate shame, silence, and fear. It also weaponizes the religious social sanctions that Iran's government itself has perpetuated since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Reported statements by Iranian security officials while committing SGBV demonstrate this specific intent to weaponize religion during the current wave of arrests.

This factsheet analyzes how the Iranian government weaponizes religion as part of a deliberate campaign of SGBV specifically targeting individuals on the basis of religion or belief. It then describes how Iran's government uses or tolerates SGBV against religious minorities and religious dissidents. The factsheet then describes how Iranian officials have used SGBV against those peacefully protesting mandatory hijab laws, giving specific examples.

### SGBV and Religious Freedom in Iran

The [United Nations](#) notes that SGBV can "include sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or in private. It also includes threats of violence, coercion and manipulation. This can take many forms such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honor crimes.'" SGBV affects people of all genders and faith communities but is often targeted at historically marginalized groups, including religious minorities. In some cases, states tolerate SGBV by individuals or non-state actors by failing to enforce laws or creating lenient legal ramifications for SGBV, while in other cases the state itself is the perpetrator. Under U.S. law, state-perpetrated rape constitutes a [gross violation of human rights](#), based on the same standard that the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) uses to define "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom.

SGBV creates physical, emotional, and psychological trauma regardless of who it victimizes. These harms are often long-term and may far outlast the physical effects. Sexual assault and rape are not only physical violations but also violations of personhood and personal autonomy, a harm exacerbated where societies downplay or deny these violations outright.

States weaponize religion in the perpetration of SGBV against members of religion or belief communities in three ways. First, state-perpetrated SGBV uniquely harms people from religious traditions that emphasize sexual purity. Sex outside marriage (usually the case with state-perpetrated SGBV) is forbidden in many religious traditions. In Iran, this religious prohibition is a [basis](#) for state laws against adultery. Security officials who commit SGBV in Iran have also used *sigheh*, a temporary verbal marriage contract, to justify otherwise prohibited sex with women on religious grounds. Iranian prison officials have [attacked](#) the sexual purity of women arrested for protesting mandatory hijab laws, [using](#) “sexual [profanities](#) and references to genitals” and requiring unscientific [virginity tests](#). The effects of state-perpetrated SGBV against people from religions that emphasize purity can be lifelong, affecting a survivor’s ability to marry, gain employment, or associate with others. States like Iran also impose lenient punishments for SGBV perpetrated by non-state actors on the basis of purity ideas often grounded in religion. So-called “honor killings” often occur after a person (usually a woman or person who does not conform to traditional gender norms) harms the honor of a male relative, including through behavior viewed as sexually [impure](#). In Iran, men who murder [women](#) or [nonbinary](#) relatives in the name of honor face more lenient sentences than perpetrators of other homicides. Iran’s government [justifies](#) this legal leniency on religious grounds.

Second, state-perpetrated SGBV is particularly harmful to religious people whose religion or belief emphasizes modesty, such as women who cover specific parts of their body on the basis of their religion or belief. The state’s intent in such cases is to use the violation of modesty to maximize the humiliation and shame women survivors experience, deterring them from further opposing government policy. These effects are exacerbated in Iran when the government propagandizes [against Baha’i](#), Armenian Christian, and other religious minority women as sexually deviant.

Finally, state-perpetrated SGBV reinforces religious ideas—often perpetuated by the state itself—that women and those who do not conform to traditional gender norms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people, are second-class citizens. While gender inequality can originate outside religion, states may invoke religious doctrine to use gender hierarchy as a basis of political order. The objective of SGBV in this context is to [reassert](#) state control over the bodies of people defying this hierarchy. Gender minorities who are also part of minority religious communities in Iran are particularly at risk since they are second-class citizens on both accounts. An Armenian Christian woman arrested at protests against mandatory hijab laws in October 2022 [reported](#) that an interrogator at Evin Prison called her “impure,” a “whore,” and an “infidel.” He told her, “You thought that because you’re a Christian you can ... remove the hijab.” The interrogator also reportedly unbuttoned her coat and whispered sexual fantasies into her ear.

## SGBV By Iranian Officials Against Religious Freedom Protesters

In September 2022, nationwide protests broke out after the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini following her arrest by Iran’s Morality Police (*Gasht-e Ershad*) for wearing an “improper hijab.” In the following months, security and intelligence forces have arrested tens of thousands of peaceful protesters. Iranian officials are using sexual harassment, assault, and rape to shame, silence, and [traumatize](#) prisoners who were arrested for peacefully asserting their freedom of religion or belief. Some of the [survivors](#) of this state-perpetrated SGBV are [minors](#).

Iranians arrested for protesting mandatory hijab laws and other religious freedom violations are being [subjected](#) to a deliberate and systematic campaign of SGBV by police officers, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers, prison officials, and prison [interrogators](#). Men and [women](#) officers participate in this violence. SGBV takes place at police stations, in prisons, and at [unofficial sites](#) at IRGC bases and facilities run by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence. Reports also indicate Iran’s Basij militia has run detention centers at mosques in Mashhad. As indicated, these individuals often make statements during their assaults that demonstrate the intent to maximize the effects of the SGBV they commit against this group of prisoners. This sexual violence is not the result of lax enforcement or improper training, but rather the intentional weaponization of religious beliefs to

maximize the harm to survivors of these assaults. Many of the reported cases of Iran's official use of SGBV would constitute torture and the flagrant denial of the security of persons under [IRFA](#).

Iran's government is also deliberately attempting to [cover up](#) officials' sexual [assault and rape](#) of women and girls by disseminating misinformation through Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents and state media channels. Contradicting the extensive evidence to the contrary, Iran's prison service has flatly [denied](#) women have been sexually assaulted at all in detention facilities. An Iranian official ordered an inquiry in January 2023 into claims of SGBV but [cautioned](#) that "before anything else, proof must be sought from the people expressing these claims," shifting the onus onto accusers rather than government officials. In March 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [told](#) CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour that these rape and sexual assault allegations were "baseless."

#### Allegations of Iranian State-Perpetrated SGBV

Survivors of state-perpetrated SGBV in Iran face a severe threat of government retribution and social sanction for going public with their stories. Many have declined to be publicly named when they speak out against these violations. However, media outlets and human rights organizations have documented and verified numerous [reports](#) of [SGBV](#) against Iranians (including minors) in ways that weaponize religion. In September 2022, security officers [sexually assaulted](#) and threatened to rape two women during their arrest and at the police station where they were held. That same month, a woman arrested during protests in Zahedan over discrimination against Iran's Sunni Baluch minority was taken to an IRGC facility, where three men [raped](#) her over the course of her detention, which lasted over a month. A woman from Sanandaj who participated in a similar protest reported eight officers groping her during her arrest and shoving her into a van with three other women. Security officers then [gagged](#) the women with their hijabs. In October 2022, an [IRGC officer](#) reportedly groped and raped a woman arrested for handing out flyers at a protest against mandatory hijab laws. A nurse at a hospital in Gilan [reported](#) treating at least five women protesters for vaginal infections and bleeding as a result of sexual assault or rape in police custody. Young women (and a 17-year-old girl) detained at Urmia Prison following their participation in protests [reported](#) that IRGC officials had raped them at IRGC Intelligence Organization temporary

detention centers. When prisoners complained about this mistreatment, 10 of them reportedly were taken to the Ministry of Information and beaten. Men who have participated in protests have also been victims of state-perpetrated SGBV. For example, police in Mashhad [sexually assaulted](#) a 30-year-old man attending the 40-day commemoration of the shooting of Sunni worshippers leaving Friday prayers in Zahedan on November 9. Iranian security forces have also [committed](#) SGBV against children arrested during or after protests. These include threats of rape, electric shock to the genital area, groping of genitals, and in one case, sodomizing with a hose pipe.

In some cases, the names of survivors are publicly reported.

**Armita Abbasi** is a 21-year-old Instagram user who was [arrested](#) during protests in Karaj in October 2022. Iran's government accused her of being a leader of protests against mandatory hijab laws and other restrictions. She was charged with "propaganda against the state" and "conspiring against national security." In January 2023, Abbasi [participated](#) in a hunger strike over the poor conditions in Kachoui Prison where she was detained. She was tried at a [hearing](#) at the Karaj Revolutionary Court on [January 29](#) and temporarily [released](#) from prison on February 7. On [October 18, 2022](#), one week after her arrest, plainclothes officers [took](#) Abbasi from prison to the Imam Ali hospital in Karaj. Multiple doctors and hospital staff report that during the visit, she was [suffering](#) from rectal hemorrhaging and lacerations consistent with repeated incidents of rape. The plainclothes officials attempted to pressure doctors into writing that these rapes occurred before her arrest. They then took Abbasi out of the hospital through a back door and returned her to prison.

**Kayan Samadi** is a 23-year-old Kurdish-Iranian medical student. He was arrested following his participation in protests against the killing of Mahsa Amini and taken to a clandestine site in Oshnavieh where he was held for 21 days and then released on bail. At the site, two interrogators calling themselves "Rezaei" and "Ibrahimi" tortured Samadi. He was subjected to extended electrocution of his genitals as part of an attempt to force him into a false confession. On the 16th day of his detention, the two interrogators reportedly raped him with a baton.

**Benyamin Kouhkan** is a 17-year-old minor and resident of Zahedan, where members of Iran's Sunni Muslim Baluch minority have staged weekly protests following Friday prayers. Iran's government has [responded](#)

repeatedly to these protests with violent repression, including violence targeting Sunni men *leaving* houses of worship after praying. IRGC intelligence officials *arrested* Kouhkan and his brother Esmail on January 3 amid these ongoing weekly protests. At the Zahedan Juvenile Detention Center, prison officials reportedly *sexually assaulted* Benyamin Kouhkan to pressure him into a false confession. In February, Kouhkan *attempted* suicide by swallowing toilet water and shampoo over the torture he suffered in prison. He *remains* in pre-trial detention.

**Mehdi Mohammadifard** is a 19-year-old whom *IRGC officers* arrested in Nowshahr in October 2022 after protests against the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini. Despite being under treatment for mental illness, authorities *held* him in solitary confinement for at least 20 days in an pest-*infested* cell, and denied him food. On December 13, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Sari *sentenced* him to two death sentences on charges of “corruption on Earth” and “enmity against God.” During his detention, IRGC agents *raped* Mohammadifard, causing rectal bleeding and injuries severe enough to require hospitalization.

**Javad Rouhi** is a 35-year-old arrested in Nowshahr in September 2022 for his peaceful participation in protests against the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini. Despite having a mental illness, The IRGC *held* him for 40 days in solitary confinement at the Shahid Kazemi facility of Tir Kola prison in Sari. On December 13, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Sari sentenced him to two death sentences on charges of “corruption on Earth” and “enmity against God,” respectively. Rouhi received a third death sentence on *apostasy* charges after IRGC agents in the prison tortured him into confessing he had allegedly burned a Qur’an. His trial *lasted* 45 minutes. While in detention, IRGC officers *sexually assaulted* Rouhi, placing ice cubes on his testicles and elsewhere on his body for periods of 48 hours.

## Conclusion

Freedom of religion or belief ensures individual autonomy to have, change, reject, interpret, and manifest religion or belief according to one’s own conscience, which is at the core of other interconnected human rights. States using SGBV to target people on the basis of religion or belief seek to deny this autonomy by deliberately weaponizing religion or belief as a tool of shame and silencing.

The Iranian state’s use of SGBV is *not new, nor* is it uniquely used against those seeking greater religious freedom. However, the government of Iran is using SGBV with unique intentions and effects against those protesting gender-based restrictions on FoRB. These violations of personal autonomy as a *punishment* for religious dissent are an egregious *violation* of freedom of religion or belief. They compound upon similar *violations* that have led the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to *recommend* that the U.S. Department of State designate Iran a Country of Particular Concern every year since 2001. In March 2023, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran Javid Rehman *stated* that rape and sexual violence by Iranian officials, among other violations, may amount to crimes against humanity.

In working to eliminate SGBV globally, the United States government should continue to coordinate international action and support efforts at the United Nations and other international bodies to hold Iranian officials accountable for the Iranian government’s deliberate and systematic campaign of violence. Accounting for the experience of survivors of this violence can help the United States better respond in a way that both reduces the preponderance of SGBV and counteracts the chilling effects such attacks have on religious freedom in Iran.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

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**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Keely Bakken**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**  
*Researcher*

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*Research Analyst*

**Madeline Vellturio**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**  
*Researcher*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.