



WE IRANIAN WOMEN



STUDY GUIDE

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We Iranian Women

Through exclusive testimonies and clandestine videos, *We Iranian Women* gives voice to courageous women in Iran who risked their lives to share their stories. Many prominent women in culture, art and academia, who were forced to leave their beloved country, explain through their perilous and often tragic experiences. The film chronicles their ongoing battle against patriarchy, economic crisis, corruption, and rigid religious and ideological beliefs.

About Iran

Iran—officially the Islamic Republic of Iran—is a country in southwestern Asia. To the north it borders Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea, and to the south the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. It borders Afghanistan and to the east, and Turkey and Iraq are to the west. Until 1935, the country was known as Persia. In 1979, Iran became an Islamic republic. Its capital city is Tehran and its official language is Farsi. The population of Iran is about 87 million. Most of these people—more than 98 percent—are Muslim.¹ Religion is an important part of daily life for many people in Iran, and has been so for hundreds of years.

Government

Iran is a theocratic republic. It has a president and a legislature, which are elected by the people. Its president is Ebrahim Raisi, elected in 2021. However, the person who has the most power in Iran is the Supreme Leader, who is appointed by a group called the Assembly of Experts and is elected for life. As explained by PBS, the Supreme Leader has power over almost everything in the country. PBS says,

According to Iran's Constitution, the Supreme Leader is responsible for the delineation and supervision of "the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran," which means that he sets the tone and direction of Iran's domestic and foreign policies. The Supreme Leader also is commander-in-chief of the armed forces and controls the Islamic Republic's intelligence and security operations; he alone can declare war or peace. He has the power to appoint and dismiss the leaders of the judiciary, the state radio and television networks, and the supreme commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He also appoints six of the twelve members of the Council of Guardians, the powerful body that oversees the activities of Parliament and determines which candidates are qualified to run for public office.²

The position of Supreme Leader was created in 1979. Before that, the country was ruled by a monarch. The monarchy came to power in 1921. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, a number of foreign nations—including Russia and Britain—had been fighting for control of Iran. However, in 1921, Reza Khan, who was an officer in the Persian army, took control of the country.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/>

² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html>

He took the name Reza Shah Pahlavi. Shah is a title used to mean king or sovereign in Iran. His son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi became Shah in 1941.

In 1979, the Pahlavi monarchy ended when Pahlavi was forced to flee the country because of the Islamic Revolution. An Islamic republic was created, with Ruhollah Khomeini becoming Supreme Leader. Khomeini was a cleric, which is a religious leader. He had been an outspoken opponent of Pahlavi's policies, including his Western influences, and had been exiled from Iran in 1964. When Khomeini died in 1989, Ali Khamenei was chosen by the Assembly of Experts to be the new Supreme Leader. Khamenei remains in that position today.

Hijab

The hijab is a head covering worn by Muslim women. Some people also refer to it as a veil. The word "hijab" is also used more generally, as a term to describe modest behavior, including conservative clothing. Modesty is an important principle of Islam. Most Muslims agree that both men and women should dress modestly. However, there is disagreement over exactly what that means for women, and whether they should be required to cover their heads or faces. Since 1983, the hijab has been compulsory in Iran for women when they are in public. They are also required to wear long, loose-fitting clothing. Penalties for not following the law range from fines to prison time.

The morality police are a law enforcement body that runs street patrols in order to enforce hijab and modesty. They can detain women for a variety of reasons including not wearing a head covering, or not wearing it correctly, but also for generally not having an appearance that is deemed to be modest. Assal Rad, research director at the National Iranian American Council explains, "If [clothing] is too tight, if the body shows too much, if your sleeves are up, if your jeans are torn. . . . They will take you to a detention center . . . until someone comes and brings you the [appropriate clothes]." ³

Women's Rights

Not only are modesty codes for women strictly enforced in Iran, but Iranian women do not have the same rights as men. As explained in a *Time* article, they face a long list of restrictions. The author says, "Iranian women have not only been forced to veil but have been forbidden from dancing or singing solo in public, riding a bicycle, attending matches in sports arenas, becoming judges or president. They must sit at the back of the bus and can travel abroad only with their husband's permission. Their court testimony and inheritance are deemed worth half that of men. They are among the very few women in the world whose grandmothers had more rights."⁴

The country has not always been so restrictive. Under the Pahlavi monarchy, women gained many rights in Iran. For example, the marriage age for women was raised from 13 to 18, men did

³ Quoted in <https://time.com/6230535/iran-morality-police-mahsa-amini-hijab/>

⁴ <https://time.com/6313431/iran-women-defiant-amini-anniversary/>

not automatically gain custody of children in a divorce, and women could go to university, vote, and run for a seat in parliament. An article published by the United States Institute of Peace notes, “By 1978, on the eve of Iran’s revolution, 22 women sat in parliament and 333 women served on elected local councils. One-third of university students were female. Two million women were in the work force, more than 146,000 of them in the civil service.” However, following the revolution, many of these rights were lost. The Institute says, “The new theocracy systematically rolled back five decades of progress in women’s rights.”⁵

Protests

There has been widespread criticism of Iran’s morality police as being too brutal. This intensified following the 2022 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. Amini was arrested by the police for violating hijab law. She was reportedly beaten by police, and later passed away. Authorities blamed her death on a pre-existing health condition, however, her family denied this. A United Nations fact-finding mission later concluded that Amini’s death was the result of “physical violence in custody.”⁶

Amini’s death sparked widespread protest. At her funeral, women pulled off their headscarves in solidarity. Protest quickly spread across the country and to other countries. Iran has experienced many instances of protest in the past, but this has been one of the largest-scale and most persistent. In addition, many men have participated in the recent protests.

Hundreds of protestors have been killed and thousands arrested by the government. Human Rights Watch says, “Iranian authorities have killed hundreds of protesters, arrested thousands of people, and tortured scores of detainees, including women and children. Human rights groups are investigating the killing of more than 500 people, including 69 children, during the protests.”⁷ A UN fact-finding mission agrees that many crimes and violations of international law have been committed by the government in response to protests, including killings, rape, torture, unnecessary use of force, and enforced disappearances. Sara Hossain, chair of the Fact-Finding Mission insists, “These acts form part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against the civilian population in Iran, namely against women, girls, boys and men who have demanded freedom, equality, dignity and accountability.” She says, “We urge the Government to immediately halt the repression of those who have engaged in peaceful protests, in particular women and girls.”⁸ Despite the government’s continued repression and use of deadly force against protestors, throughout Iran, protest continues today.

⁵ <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/womens-movement>

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/iran-chokehold-dissent>

⁸ Quoted in <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>

Additional Resources

Books

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- Marjane Satrapi, *Woman, Life, Freedom*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2024.
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