



Outrage Spreads After Iranian Woman Mahsa Amini's Wrongful Detainment and Suspicious Death While in Police Custody

The recent wrongful detainment and death of an Iranian woman at the hands of the country's "morality police" has drawn legitimate outrage, both domestically and around the world. Activists have highlighted the problematic nature with the incident, and how citizens should not be subjected to human rights violations and abuses merely for what they choose to wear or not wear. Iranian authorities enforce a strict hijab law which mandates women cover their hair and wear loose fitting robes in public spaces. Punishment for violating these laws range from a fine to flogging and imprisonment. Mahsa Amini, the victim, was detained on the streets of Tehran while she was visiting with her family, who reported that she was following the parameters of the law and thus do not understand the reasoning for her detainment. The police did not offer an explanation as to why she was detained, stating only vaguely that it involved the hijab rule. In addition to sparking international outrage and protests, Amini's death also prompted the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to sanction and condemn Iran's "morality police" for abusive behavior and the violation of the rights of peaceful Iranian protesters.

With their sanctions, OFAC is targeting a handful of senior leaders of Iran's security organizations: the "Morality Police," the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the Army's Ground Forces, the Basij Resistance Forces, and the Law Enforcement Forces. These officials oversee organizations that routinely employ violence to suppress peaceful protesters and members of Iranian civil society, political dissidents, and women's rights activists. Iran's security forces published a statement suspiciously claiming that Amini suddenly collapsed from a heart attack at the detention center while receiving educational training on hijab rules. However, while she was in police custody, her brother who reportedly was sitting outside the detention center, heard screaming from the inside of it.

Since it went into effect in 1981 after the Islamic revolution, Iran's mandatory hijab laws have been contested by many women and rights activists. Multiple protests have broken out recently after Amini's death, with activists taking to the streets in protest against the hijab laws and "morality police." Many believe that these laws are imposed to restrict women's freedoms, and observers have outlined the unnecessary and disproportionate use of force against them. Multiple people have reportedly been shot and beaten by the police during these latest rounds of protests. The reaction from police forces has been severe, as more than 35 female protesters have been arrested in the capital and could face up to 10 years in prison.

Women's rights activist Masih Alinejad started a campaign five years ago known as the stealthy freedom movement, where Iranian women were encouraged to share moments of secret freedoms against these mandatory headscarf laws. She states that she has no regrets about starting this movement even though Alinejad is subjected to daily death threats, cannot go back to Iran to visit family for fear of arrest, and some family members no longer speak to her.

The Iranian regime has a long history of prisoner abuse and repression, with some recent examples including the brutal crackdown in November of 2019 whereby authorities used excessive and unlawful force against masses of protesters blocking roads and throwing stones. During the crackdown, authorities ordered the near-total shutdown of internet across the country, and according to Amnesty International, at least 304 people were killed.