

Repression in Iran: ‘They took my clothes off and cut my hair’

Elaheh Ejbari, 22, was kidnapped in the street and held for four days after taking part in a protest in Tehran following the death of Mahsa Amini, who died while in custody of Iran’s morality police. Ejbari, who comes from Iran’s Baluchestan region on the border with Pakistan, says she was subjected to sexual violence and humiliation, partly due to her ethnicity.

Issued on: 15/09/2023 - 07:30
5 min



A selfie of Elaheh Ejbari taken during her transit through Turkey after having fled Iran at the end of 2022. © Elaheh Ejbari

By: Bahar MAKOOI

[Mahsa Amini](#) was the same age as me – 22. Like me, she came from a provincial town. I grew up in Baluchestan. Her death made me very angry. I saw myself in her, and right away I wanted to [protest](#).

Life was already very difficult for me in [Tehran](#), but I felt safer there than in Baluchestan. To know this kind of thing was also happening in the capital was awful.

I was married at the age of 16. It wasn’t a consensual marriage. I left as soon as I could. Without my husband knowing, I prepared for the entrance exams at the University of Tehran and I was accepted into the psychology programme. I ran away to the capital.

He tried to take me back by force, but with the help of some lawyers that I met at university, we managed to get him to give up and I was finally able to get a divorce after three years.

'I was so beside myself that I threw away my veil'

I thought when coming to live in Tehran that women would be considered equals here, that life would be simpler. I had put the blame for all my misery on my family, which is very traditional. But I found out the hard way that it's the system that wants our society to be like this, that orders come from the top.

After the death of Mahsa Amini and the first protests, the city was crawling with security forces. We saw men with guns everywhere, especially at the entrances to the subway. I wasn't wearing a veil anymore, I didn't even have anything covering my shoulders – I had put it away in my bag. Once, an agent made a remark and I found myself insulting him. We were so angry that even though these armed men were there, we kept shouting, "Woman, life, freedom".

[Read more](#) Iran's regime has crushed protests, but 'lost the battle' for obligatory hijab

They threw teargas right in front of me during one of the demonstrations in the centre of Tehran. I turned my head and I saw a girl my age being beaten on the ground. My heart began to race, I didn't think, I threw myself between her and the policeman. He knocked me out with a single blow. Three boys came from I don't know where. They claimed to be my brothers, bargained with the policeman and got me out of there. "Get that slut out of my sight," the officer said.

The boys took me to a side street and lit a cigarette to help dissipate the effects of the teargas that had burned my eyes. They gave me something to drink. It was the first time that men had looked after me. I felt that their hearts were as heavy as mine.

In Baluchestan, the women don't even eat in the same room as the men. I spent so many meals alone in the kitchen. I had no phone, no satellite TV. In my family, I had always been a disgrace – they were ashamed that I was studying, ashamed that I was divorced.

'They insulted me because I am Baluch'

In Tehran, I earned money by giving language classes to young people. Sometimes I sold spices in the street, in Revolution Square.

On December 5, I was coming from having just given a class in the Tehranpars neighbourhood (in the capital's east). Some men threw me into a van. To this day, I still don't know who they were exactly. They locked me up in a place I couldn't identify. They took my clothes off and cut my hair. They made fun of my dark skin. They insulted me because I am Baluch (an ethnic minority often discriminated against by the Iranian authorities).

They didn't understand how a Baluch girl had managed to escape and live by her own means in the capital. They suspected me of receiving funding from opposition groups.

They accused me of being a representative of the Baluch cause in Tehran and representing Imam Molavi Abdolhamid (a [Sunni](#) leader of the Baluch). I laughed in their faces, telling them that I didn't know the Baluch had progressed to the point of choosing a woman to represent them. That's when they hit me. They were touching my body and they were saying to me: "You like that. You say, 'Woman, life, freedom' – you want to be completely naked, is that your slogan? So you like it. You should be thanking us." They kept on saying that they wouldn't kill me, but that they'd send me back to Baluchestan so my uncles would take care of that themselves.

'I couldn't go back to a normal life'

After four days they threw me into the street. My friends had all been worried about me, they had gone to all the morgues and alerted the media.

Daily newsletter Receive essential international news every morning
[Subscribe](#)

I tried to go back to a normal life but I couldn't. My students cancelled their lessons, one after another. The owner of my apartment asked me to leave. I don't know if they were pressured or if they were just afraid. I collected all the money that I had and I left for the airport, where I got on a flight for [Turkey](#), without knowing if I'd be able to make it. Looking back, I realise that the men who took me knew who I was. I had already spent two months in Evin Prison for fuelling "propaganda against the regime". I was considered a women's rights activist because I'm fighting to ban child marriage in Iran (the minimum legal age is 13 for girls) and also because of my posts on Instagram.

Luckily, I was able to go to Turkey and I am now living in a European country. Overseas, I met people who understand me better. Because even in Tehran, the other girls didn't know what I had endured.

I'm seeing a psychologist and that helps me a lot. Even today, when I see a van slow down – even here – I get scared.

This article has been translated from the original in French.



Mahsa Amini's death, one year on