

Proposed hijab penalties in Iran: 'They can't prosecute millions of women'

One year ago this Saturday, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died after being arrested by Iran's morality police for wearing her hijab "improperly". Her death led to massive anti-regime protests, known by their now-iconic slogan: "Woman, Life, Freedom". The Observers team has been in regular contact with dozens of women across Iran over the past 12 months. Many of them have told us that it has become the "new normal" for millions of women in Iran to go out in public with their hair uncovered. But with a new law under discussion that would massively increase the penalties for hijab-related offenses, how long will these new freedoms last?

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While a year ago it was unusual to see women without hijab in public spaces in Iran, thousands of amateur images posted online – and the accounts of women inside the country – show that millions of Iranian women now routinely go out in public without the Islamic head covering. © Observers

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A new law is under discussion in the Iranian parliament that would increase the penalties for the improper wearing of hijab from the equivalent of 1 euro to 3,000 euros, and the maximum prison sentence from two months to 10 years. The proposed law has special measures for so-called "celebrities", including the confiscation of 10 percent of their assets.

Thousands of amateur images posted online - and the accounts of women inside the country - show that millions of Iranian women now routinely go out in public without the Islamic head coverings known as hijab.

'I no longer wear hijab in public spaces'

Sita (not her real name) is a young Iranian university student who lives in Tehran. Although she grew up in a religious family, she has decided to stop wearing a hijab.

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After the protests started, this question in my head became louder and louder: Why do I have to seek permission from the state – from an ideology that I don't even believe in – to live the way I want to live? I have found new courage to stand up for my choices, despite the risks.

In the last year, many things have changed for me. The first change was in my family. I feel that they are much more open-minded and look at women differently than they used to.

Since the death of Mahsa Amini, I no longer wear hijab in public spaces. Society has generally been supportive. Before the protests, if you went out in public without hijab, people would stare at you, even other women. Now, the most common reaction is a simple smile. Sometimes people say encouraging words when they pass by.

History has taught us that any change in society is difficult, and entrenched ideologies are difficult to crack. Despite all this, I see many changes in society. I have the feeling that many people who are religious and observant have asked themselves this question: "If I have the freedom to lead the lifestyle I choose, then girls and women on the street who do not wear hijab should have the same right to dress the way they want."

We've seen that Iranians are willing to pay the price for supporting women. The café owner accepts that his café might be closed down for a few days, but he does not ask the women in his café to wear the hijab. When men fight like this for women's rights, it shows that a revolution has happened in a macho society.

Dancing for girls in public in Iran with no Islamic hijab could have a severe consequences, however many Instagram influencers share their videos.

'They can't prosecute the millions of women in the streets'

The "celebrities" targeted by the draft law could include social media influencers. One of the favourite targets for arrests by Iranian security forces in the weeks before the anniversary has been female influencers who post images of themselves without hijab to their tens of thousands of followers.

In recent months, several Iranian influencers have been arrested, among them a female motorcyclist, a young lifestyle and fashion influencer, a travel blogger and Sar, a teenager whose video of her with her friends in a shopping mall [went viral](#).

Varia (not her real name) is a lifestyle influencer who lives in Shiraz. She talks about the pressure influencers face.

It's scary. Every day I hear that a friend or colleague has been arrested, their bank account frozen or their car impounded. But I am glad that there are so many women who resist despite the threats and pressure by the regime. Even if they silence women who are so-called "celebrities", they cannot prosecute the millions of women in the streets.

The most impressive change I have observed since a year ago is that verbal harassment of women on the street – which used to be not uncommon – has decreased. I have not had a bad experience in a year, even though I'm downtown working every day.

The private sector does not dare to require its female employees to wear hijab. As far as I can tell, people have made their peace with women's personal choice. And what is even nicer is that these changes can be observed not only in the

rich neighbourhoods of Tehran, but also in the poor neighbourhoods in the south of Tehran and in other cities. These changes are permanent, I think, they are the result of 40 years of resistance.

Elaheh Asgri is a travel blogger, she was recently arrested for weeks.

Iranian authorities have also targeted Iran's fast-growing start-up industry, accusing it of propagating Western values by allowing women to go to work without a hijab.

In recent months, several start-ups were targeted by security forces. Some of them had to stop working for weeks, others had their headquarters attacked or their executives arrested.

Shamila (not her real name) is a senior executive at a start-up in Tehran. She talks about her experience over the past year.

Most people who work in startups support the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests. Most women at start-ups like ours refuse to wear hijab. However, it is easier to bully start-ups than millions of women on the streets, one by one. The authorities send threatening letters and sometimes order start-ups to close their office for a few days. The companies that own the start-ups just want to avoid headaches and keep the money flowing.

I think this will force more Iranians than ever – especially talented women working in these startups – to migrate abroad.

The women we have been speaking to believe – or hope – that the protests sparked by Mahsa Amini's death have changed Iranian society forever. But they say there is more to be done to remove the theocratic regime that governs their lives, and they will keep fighting.

Sar, a teenager influencer who's one her video went viral and she was arrested for days

Varia, the influencer, says:

For months I was preoccupied with the price we pay for these changes: People, teenagers and even children who have lost their lives. I wish all that spilt blood had made a bigger difference. But I think all that pain has led our society to where we are now.

This bloodshed has made the equation clear to everyone in Iran, I think: either we put an end to them or they put an end to us, there is no middle ground.

Sita is also optimistic about the future:

The war is not over yet, but so far we have won some battles. You can see by their actions that the regime is desperate; they are arresting singers, journalists, university professors. But I'm optimistic about the future of our country. I'm really focused on the present. What can I do? How can I help the protests to succeed?