

WOMEN

Being a Woman Against Compulsory Hijab in an Iranian Religious City

JANUARY 25, 2024

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Last week, the police commander in the central city of Qom, Mohammadreza Mirheidari, stated that warning messages had been sent to the owners of 74,000 cars in the past 10 months for hijab violations.

Mirheidari also reported that 13,000 cars had been impounded because their occupants opposed mandatory hijab.

Women residing in the most religious or traditional cities not only face challenges arising from the law, but also contend with conflicts rooted in societal culture and customs.

To delve deeper into this matter, IranWire interviewed four women affected by these issues.

Dezful, January 2024

Dezful stands as an ancient and historically significant city nestled along the Dez River in southern Khuzestan province.

Residential homes were hit by long-range missiles during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, resulting in the loss of hundreds of innocent lives.

city's heart lies a religious shrine believed to house the body of an offspring of the 7th Shia Imam.

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mehraveh, 17, provides insights into the changing dynamics in Dezful, especially regarding women.

"While driving and inside the car, my mother opts not to wear a hijab. Surprisingly, we haven't received any hijab-related text messages so far.

"This is likely because numerous areas in our city lack traffic cameras, and due to the high temperatures, many car windows are tinted. In contrast, my aunt who resides in Ahvaz (the provincial capital) has had her car impounded for similar reasons."

The teenager says that within the families themselves, flouting cultural norms often lead to unwanted interference in personal matters.

Instances of public scrutiny, such as casual comments in hypermarkets, add to the societal pressure and contribute to heightened tension within the community.

Mehraveh also points out an increased security presence in places like hypermarkets to enforce hijab regulations.

Qom, December 2023

The city of Qom is one of Shia holiest sites, home to dozens of seminaries and many of its most prominent clerics.

The city's police commander reported that the number of cases related to violations of compulsory hijab laws reached 1,968 in 2023 – six times higher than in the previous year.

Razieh, an employee at a private laboratory in Qom, recounts that in the past, women wearing a cloak or a colored scarf would receive warnings that they disrespected the city's dignity.

Women without chador were typically considered outsiders. After the 2022 nationwide protests, as the atmosphere became more tense, the restrictions intensified.

According to Razieh, local media outlets constantly broadcast news inducing fear and panic among women.

Recent reports claimed that 4,000 people had been hired to monitor the city's entrances and report the plate numbers of cars with occupants without hijab.

Drastic measures were taken against sports centers and women's clubs, justified by claims of inappropriate online postings.

Razieh says that she hasn't mustered the courage to venture outside without a hijab because of prevailing societal expectations.

She challenges the government's claim that everyone in Qom supports hijab, citing examples of friends with clerical relatives who don't adhere to hijab or even religious beliefs.

Mashhad, January 2024

Nearly three years before the eruption of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the Fars news agency, which is affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), reported a significant surge in opposition to mandatory hijab among women and girls in religious cities.

The citizens of Mashhad, the site of one of the most renowned Shia shrines, have been deprived of basic cultural programs, including concerts.

Arezoo, a local woman who opposes mandatory hijab, tells IranWire that over the past year, many cafés, restaurants and businesses in the city have faced bans and restrictions for non-compliance with headscarf regulations.

Some places have dark windows or curtains to hide the inside, but government informants remain vigilant, according to Arezoo.

She highlighted a peculiar increase in the number of CCTV cameras in Mashhad.

"Many women against hijab wear hats or scarves inside their cars, but there is a significant number of individuals without hijab in public spaces, streets, arcades and shops," she says.

Rezvaneh, another woman who works in Mashhad, describes the strict enforcement of hijab rules on the subway, where the names of passengers entering and exiting the stations are displayed.

She says that many citizens, fearing the impoundment of their cars or the closure of their businesses, have reluctantly resorted to wearing headscarves.

The owner of the beauty institution where she works has seen her business closed several times, while her daughter, who runs a clothing gallery, has been repeatedly admonished.

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