



## Voice notes of a revolution

From inside Iran, women have bravely and boldly recorded these messages for the world. Please hear their voices.

By [Allyson Horn](#) and [Emily Clark](#) with illustrations by [Emma Machan](#)

Published 8 Dec 2022, 7:38pm

Every time I go out, I mean before going out, I take a good look at myself in the mirror and I look at my dress and think to myself if that's the last dress I'm going to wear. If this is the dress I'm going to get killed in.

And the only thing I really think about when I'm in the streets is my mum. I don't know what she's going to do after me.

Mahsa Amini died while in the custody of Iran's hated morality police – the so-called 'brutality or mortality police'.

Her death was the spark that lit a fire among the country's women and girls. Now, that burning anger is fuelling what many hope will be a revolution.

The women of Iran are demanding freedom, equality and justice for the violation of their human rights.

But their oppressors – the ruling Iranian regime – are cutting the country off from the outside world and from each other.

With internet access and cellular networks across the country shut down, the leaders of Iran's biggest protest movement in decades are facing immense challenges and risks to their lives.

"I don't take my phone with me. If they see you recording, they shoot you," one woman tells the ABC via encrypted text message.

"I don't take it 'cause if [they] arrest me, all my information is in my phone. I don't even take any bank card or identity card. Nothing.

## “Bare pockets. Bare hands.”

For journalists, the story of Mahsa, Iran's renewed protest movement and the crushing weight of the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's regime is as important to tell as it is difficult.

Several women inside Iran have provided the ABC with answers to questions via voice notes. It's vitally important to hear the voices of Iran's women and for those women to feel safe as they tell their story.

The humble voice note – something you may send to friends multiple times a day, something you might use to give life to random thoughts – has become a tool of rebellion.

The women of Iran have risked arrest and even death to send these dispatches to the outside world. Please listen to them carefully.

**‘They go for the eyes you  
know’**



It's nearly midnight when Fatemah\* sends the ABC a flurry of graphic photos and voice messages. She has been shot again, while protesting on the streets.

Well, I've been shot four times, each time with different bullets. Once, we were chanting in the street that they attacked us and started shooting. I escaped and my leg was shot by a small shot cartridge. I think they call it slug, made by lead.

I fell down but hardly stood and tried to run, not to be arrested, crawling my leg with me while it was bleeding. And my friend ride me home and there I took the bullet out and make it disinfected.

As you may know, we can't go to clinics or hospitals for this kind of injuries since some regiment forces are already there and if you go there you will be arrested.

Several giant welts have formed around bullet wounds on her legs, the blood drying on her mottled blue and purple skin.

She says she's lucky it's only her legs, but knows the next time she might not survive.

"We had no chance to escape and just turned our faces back and down not to be shot in head," Fatemah says.

"I got shot by three rubber bullets – two of them hit my leg and one hit my backpack."

The internet has just been restored in Fatemah's home city after several days of a communication blackout, so this is her first chance to debrief on the latest demonstration.

She paints a terrifying picture of brutality, oppression and unchecked violence at the hands of Iranian regime forces.

In her words, it's a war zone where ordinary Iranians are hunted down, assaulted, and in some cases, killed.

"Whenever we gather and want to say any slogan against the regime, they shoot us with lachrymator [tear gas] and after that shoot us with the gun.

"The forces who come in armoured personnel carriers have sniper rifles called Draganov, which are used to kill people.

"When we are arrested, they hit us with a truncheon and put our clothes on our head.

“If you are a girl, there would be always the threat of encountering sexual harassment or even rape by regime forces.”

Fatemah is among the hundreds of thousands of women who have been using the the only tool they have, their voices, in daily protests for more than two months.

It's hard to know the exact number of people who have been killed at demonstrations, but most human rights groups and the United Nations estimate it's more than 300.

At least another 14,000 people have been arrested and detained.

Sometimes they put gun lasers on us and move it all over our body, or put small spotlights toward our faces to frighten us and make us leave the scene. It seems like a warzone indeed and sometimes it even get worse turns into a hunting ground at a glance.

Sometimes the protests are organised and advertised in encrypted virtual chat rooms to get maximum attendance. At other times, they erupt spontaneously when a group of friends start chanting on a street.

In those cases, others quickly join in, followed shortly by security forces who arrive to shut down the dissent.

Another protester, Mina\*, describes being inside a demonstration.

I see a real battlefield. Empty handed people chant with their fists swinging in the air.

The oppressors attack them. Shoot gas tears towards them. Hit them by electrical or non electrical batons. Hit them by electrical shockers. Shoot them down by real bullets or plastic ones.

You never know which one hits you actually. They shoot people in the head, they go for the eyes, you know.

Blood is everywhere. It's foggy, you can barely see what's going on around you. You hear different noises. You hear people shout while trying to run away. It's scary. It's scary and you've never seen something like that before. I bet you.

## **'You can picture your death'**

The reality of dying at a protest is a significant risk for these women, and it's constantly on Mina's mind.

She breaks down several times describing the guilt she feels, knowing the pain it would cause her family if she were killed at a demonstration.

"I don't tell my mum that I'm going to participate, because I don't want to put her under any pressure," she says.

“I don’t want to make her nervous.

“I sometimes tell my friends.”

They sometimes ask me to take good care of myself. They sometimes try to stop me from going.

But my answer to them is a saying in Farsi, we say my blood is not more colourful or is not more red than the others. Meaning that the value of my life is not higher than the others.

And if we don't protect one another, we will lose this battle. We have to win this battle.

She tells the ABC the story of a male friend who had picked up the phone of another protester during a rally.

“He was running beside him — the guy got shot and so my friend took the phone with him.

“After more than a week his family members called on his number to collect his phone and we realised that he is dead. Same stories everywhere, so sad.”

Both Mina and Fatemah remove their headscarves at protests — a move that’s against Iran’s strict Islamic dress code.

It’s a symbol of freedom, but could cause their death or capture.

“I call them brutality police,” says Mina.

“If they stopped me, I think I’m going to fight.”

Fatemah takes extra precautions to keep herself as safe as possible at demonstrations.

“I wear a mask to cover my face, and I bring extra clothes with me to change into, in case I’m hit by paintball bullets — so that then I can’t be tracked and targeted,” she says.

“I also have cigarettes and napkins soaked in vinegar, both to use against lachrymator effects and first aid, painkillers, in case of being shot.”

The women say there is a unique camaraderie that forms at protests, where strangers bonded by fear and adrenaline stop to help each other, even when they’re injured.



Shop owners also keep their doors open, so people fleeing security forces can escape and hide.

Yes, I am afraid for my life. I think about my mom. I think about my friends, my dad when I'm in the streets.

I'm afraid for my friend's life. I cannot take my eyes off them. When we are running, when we are in the streets. I look back, I look around to make sure they are around, to make sure that they are still alive.

A few days ago, one woman speaking with the ABC sent a text that read, "I saved three women's lives today", with a winking emoji.

She promised to give more details soon.

That thread has now gone quiet.

It might be a lack of connectivity. Most people are using VPNs to communicate with the outside world, but they are targeted by regime forces and become unsafe. Securing a new VPN can take weeks.

Or the woman may have been captured. Or worse.

Listen, would you believe if I tell you each and every moment is disturbing and frightful from the very second you leave home to join demonstrations?

Let me ask it from you this way: how would it feel like if you're leaving your home and your beloved ones behind, knowing that you may never get back, just a soldier who leave home to go to a war, understand what I'm saying?

You can picture your death or even worse than that being arrested, tortured, raped, and then killed.

**'We own pain these days'**

In all the conversations the ABC has had with protesters across Iran, there is one clear message: the overwhelming desire for change.

Above all, these women say they want freedom — to choose what to wear, where to walk, what to say, what to eat, where to go, and how to live their lives.

All these desires — basic human rights — are what keeps them going.

“Nowadays we live in pain, we sleep in pain, we wake up in pain,” Mina says.

“We own pain these days.

“Imagine you’re living in the 21st century and your country is run by the rules and laws of 1,400 years ago. We want to get our country back and take back the reputation of Iran and Iranians.”

Fatemah wants the world to recognise the difference between the regime and its people.

We want them to know us as Iran, not the Islamic Republic.  
We want them to see the beautiful face of Iran, instead of what the government and regime have tried to show them during these 43 years by their propaganda. And we want them to know we are not terrorists, the regime is.

The unrest has posed one of the boldest challenges to Iran’s clerical ruling elite since it came to power in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Authorities have crushed previous rounds of major protests.

But this time, international pressure on the country is also increasing.

Last month, [the United Nations voted to investigate Iran’s repression of anti-government protests](#), citing multiple examples of brutal human rights violations.

But Iranian leaders continue to blame foreign foes, like the West, for the unrest, and have made few, if any, concessions towards protesters.

In a confusing moment, the country’s attorney-general suggested the morality police had been disbanded, but analysts and Iran watchers are unsure if that has actually happened.

The Iranian judiciary maintains that protesters are insulting religious sanctities and breaching laws of the clerical regime — something punishable by death.

Fatemah says she'll continue to protest for as long as it takes.

She calls it her “national duty”.

“It’s my human duty not to be silent in the face of oppression and cruelty,” she says.

“If something happens somewhere to someone else, it also means it can also happen to me.

“We will be in the streets with the Women, Life, Freedom slogan and won’t go back home till the regime falls down.”

Therefore, if I'm against something or want another thing  
then no matter what I must pay for it.

Freedom always has a price. For us, in this very moment in  
Iran it is our blood and we are paying for freedom with our  
blood.

*\*Names have been changed for safety reasons.*

## Credits:

**Reporting:** Middle East correspondent [Allyson Horn](#)

**Production and editing:** [Emily Clark](#)

**Design and illustrations:** [Emma Machan](#)

**Additional digital production:** [Mark Doman](#)

ODYSSEY FORMAT BY [ABC NEWS STORY LAB](#)