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Campaigns blog

Honoring Sarina Esmailzadeh, Iranian protester and YouTube creator, on her 17th Birthday



Sarina Esmailzadeh was a brave, creative & inspiring young woman

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This blog is co-written by Mahsa Alimardani, ARTICLE19 and Nina Navid, Amnesty International UK. A version of this blog appeared on [Youtube](#).


Sarina was one of thousands of children who took part in the unprecedented uprising that swept Iran last year. She was part of a fearless generation. We won't

forget Sarina and the at least 43 more children killed by Iranian authorities for demanding a better future.

“Good God, let me give you my life, take me to church,” 16-year-old Sarina Esmailzadeh passionately sang Hozier’s 2013 hit song on a family road trip to the historic city of Kashan. It was her [first YouTube video](#) she excitedly titled “My First Vlog!”. That foreboding moment has now become viral, and instantly recognisable by many, as **four months later Sarina would be tragically killed** by Iranian authorities on 23 September 2022, a week into the nationwide popular uprising in the wake of Mahsa Jhina Amini’s death in custody.

Sarina would have turned 17 today, 2 July 2023. Her death serves as a reminder of the **Iranian authorities’ all-out crack down on protesters**, many of whom were children, who fearlessly took to the streets in search of a better future. One without political oppression, inequality and tyranny. The death toll of those unlawfully killed on the streets following the popular uprising that rocked Iran from September 2022 is in the hundreds, with at least [44 individually identified children](#) killed.

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Like many, Sarina took to the streets to fight for the dignity, rights and equal treatment of Iranian women and girls. **She represents the spirit of resistance among Iran's courageous Gen Z** who continue to lead these protests both on the streets and online. The artist [Hozier](#) reflected on the viral clip and Sarina's brave life and loss. "We talk about freedoms with no understanding of what it means to pay the ultimate price in fighting for it. This brave girl was only sixteen."

In honor of **Sarina's 17th birthday** — despite her tragic absence — the footprint she left behind in her vlogs endures. Sarina's death serves as a reminder of the courage and ultimate sacrifice of so many

protesters who courageously chose to risk everything in the hope of an Iran that will uphold human rights and provide a more secure future.

Sarina's legacy and her generation

Sarina's online legacy from her YouTube vlogs speaks to **the power of the internet and how it enables expression**, and in the case of Sarina, facilitates a legacy of dissent alongside the bravery of people like her, daring to dream and stand up for change.

In the midst of this historic moment, what has been poignant has been the bravery and lack of fear displayed by protesters and other dissidents, led mainly by women and youth, and continuing today, ten months into this movement. What started as an outbreak of nationwide protests has evolved into a campaign of **mass civil disobedience and political defiance**, notably as women and girls en-masse continue to reject one of the core tenets and symbols of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the mandatory hijab.

The revolutionary rallying cry "Woman, Life, Freedom", which has its origins in the Kurdish feminist movement, continues to be seen and heard across Iran – and indeed across the world.

Whilst state violence remains almost a certainty, the lack of fear against the authorities has been one of the most powerful weapons the Iranian people are wielding against the regime. Part of this bravery are the forms of dissident expression, from protests, to social media posts and videos posted online. This **defiance is now the DNA of a generation** and movement that has rocked the world.

This is one of the reasons why Sarina and her legacy are so important – a **16 year old protester who lived an authentic life of hope and bravery**, who risked everything for "Woman, Life, Freedom". While her time as a YouTube creator was brief, what she left behind is rich. In many videos we see, even before the current uprising, she was defying the mandatory hijab laws to navigate public spaces around Iran in little less than bandanas and the quintessential Gen Z bucket hat.

The world seen through Sarina

"My First Vlog!" is packed with internet memes scattered throughout the trip with witty quips between Sarina and her family about aspects of the Islamic Republic they disagreed with. From the mismanagement of some of the historic sites to disbelief at misogynistic religious verses written on the walls of the historic mosques they were visiting, **her YouTube oeuvre is a reflection of the everyday life of a thoughtful, intelligent and extremely aware sixteen year old girl**.

Well versed in internet culture, memes and sarcasm, but also excited by life, she documented simple pleasures like exploring [how to do makeup](#), or [making pizza for her family](#). In another video, she starts off by declaring "freedom is loading" as she goes into school for her final exams before a short summer break. After her exam she rejoices in her new "freedom" from school and documents a week of enjoying spending time with friends.

In one of her [most serious vlogs](#), she **reflects on her generation and their future and needs**:

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She tells her audience she has spent time in conversations with her peers to understand what the main concerns occupying their lives are. She observes that education is the only hope for them to seek independence and prosperity, but that path is littered with hurdles that are unique to the conditions of the economic, cultural and political situation of Iran. She mentions that the **happiness and security needed to be successful is dependent on freedom**, which she concedes is “where the discussion gets very dark”.

She outlines the lack of freedom and security women have within the Islamic Republic starting with the mandatory hijab law. “**What have I lacked to have been born in Iran?**” she asks, before exploring the pain of seeing the lives of her peers in L.A. or New York, enjoying life and freedom while her community is preoccupied with obtaining basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter. She goes on to lament that “it’s only natural that as a human you would look towards the better option...”.

During her pizza making video, a relative comes into the vlog to tease Sarina that she is an influencer in the making. Indeed, in the wake of her tragic loss, **Sarina is an influencer who is a symbol of her generation and their resilience and revolution.**

“If I don’t see you...bye!” signed off Sarina Esmailzadeh in her [last YouTube vlog](#) on 12 July, 2022. **Sarina’s life, voice, ambitions and bravery are the fabric of the tectonic shifts happening in Iran.**

On her 17th birthday, we can safely say, we will always see you, Sarina. Happy birthday.

Learn more about children's resistance in Iran:

- [Iran: Authorities continue to try to ‘crush the spirit of resistance’ killing at least 23 children](#)
- [Iran: families of children killed by security forces facing 'relentless intimidation'](#)

- [Iran: child detainees subjected to flogging, electric shocks and sexual violence in protest crackdown](#)

What is happening in Iran?

According to state authorities the total number of people detained in connection with the protests was above 22,000, with state media reporting that children made up a significant portion of this number. Many fell victim to unfair trials, as well as torture and other ill-treatment including sexual violence, to break the spirit of detainees, obtain forced “confessions” and push through sham trials.

In what can only reveal a deliberate strategy to crush the spirit of Iran’s youth protesters; children as young as 12 have been subject to the widespread commission of torture including rape, flogging and electric shocks in detention. Horrifyingly, seven protesters have been arbitrarily executed to date, with at least seven more individuals under sentence of death in relation to the protests.

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