



'NAKED' AND DEFIANT

Diary Of An Iranian Protester

TURN ON AUDIO AND AUTOSCROLL



By Hannah Kaviani and Michael Scollon

September 15, 2023

RFE/RL's Radio Farda asked an Iranian woman to keep a diary for three months. Nesa, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, documents her fears and anger on the eve of the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death. RFE/RL has narrated her diary entries.



JULY 21, 2023

I'm groggy from the night before.

Partying all night celebrating my friend's birthday. A rooftop party in the heart of Tehran with people close to my heart gathered in a safe space trying to enjoy a normal Thursday night.

But nothing's normal.

From the moment I got the invitation, which had minimal information because we can't trust chatting apps, to getting dressed, I'm trying to fight my inner critic and go for a see-through top without wearing something over it and leaving the stupid head scarf at home.

Nothing is normal.

I need to text everyone close to me to see if they got home safely.

My headache is not just from a hangover.

Nesa is one of the "naked" -- the term used by the Iranian authorities to describe women who go out in public without wearing the mandatory hijab, or Islamic head scarf.

Life has been anything but normal for women like Nesa ever since 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died a year ago in police custody in Tehran. Amini's death on September 16, 2022, which came after she was detained for allegedly violating Iran's controversial hijab law, gave rise to nationwide protests in which women's rights took center stage.



A woman holds up her head scarf as part of a protest in Tehran on September 27, 2022, against the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody. (Courtesy Photo/Radio Farda)

More than 500 demonstrators were killed as the clerical establishment made clear that it would not allow its strict interpretation of Islam to be questioned.

Nesa fears that renewed demonstrations could spark another bloodbath. She also seethes over the hypocrisy she witnessed as Iranians commemorated Ashura, which marks the killing of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein, a revered figure to Shi'a Muslims. A religious holiday that brings Iranians to the streets, it has also become an avenue of protest.

Rattling off the names of protesters killed in the past year, Nesa likens those responsible for their deaths to those who killed Hussein.



The festival is back on the street.

The audacity!

They cry and mourn the death of Hussein while they are a hundred times worse than the ones who killed him.

Khodanur wasn't innocent?

Kian was not pure?

Nika wasn't decent?

It is sickening, really. A couple of years ago, I didn't feel so strongly about it, but this year my blood curdles. They have no respect, no shame, and that makes them so dangerous.

I'm angry, and I need to use it as fuel to remember why I'm fighting. I'm never going back, even if Hussein himself comes back to life!



male officers accompanied by women in black chadors -- are the enforcers of the hijab law.

While there were reports that morality police patrols were suspended following the outbreak of the protests, by summer 2023 they had returned in force, and lawmakers were considering legislation that would introduce tougher penalties for violators. The chastity and hijab bill calls for hefty fines, the denial of access to mobile phone and Internet services, and lengthy prison terms.



An Iranian police officer stands on a street during the revival of the morality police in Tehran on July 16, 2023. (Majid Asgaripour/WANA via Reuters)

Some women who have been detained for hijab violations have been diagnosed with mental illnesses by Iranian courts, which have ordered them to visit state-run psychiatric centers for treatment.

Nesa rages about how the morality police strike fear into women on the street while the officers hide their own identities. She notes that more women in public are wearing the hijab, even if loosely, and a manteau, a loose overcoat that covers the lower waist.

For inspiration, Nesa looks to fellow women protesters who have paid a heavy price for their open defiance of the hijab law.



AUGUST 4, 2023

The morality police are back on the streets.



COVERING THEIR FACES BEHIND BIG THICK

sunglasses and masks.

If you're so sure of what you're doing and think you're right, why hide?

The things I'm reading are scary – the jail sentences the authorities are giving out for not giving in to their stupid mandatory hijab. But that's what they want: to scare us by patrolling the neighborhood.

I feel it's working.

The number of women I see who wear their head scarves loosely has doubled. I see more women opting to wear the manteau in this scorching summer heat.

I'm scared, too, but each time I reach for the head scarf I think about Sepideh Rashnu and Sepideh Gholian and, recently, about Parmida Shahbazi and their unfettered courage and how they refuse to bend their will and succumb to their fears and the iron hand.

At the age of 35, Nesa is settled into a middle-class existence in a neighborhood in central Tehran popular with the younger generation. She lives in a rented apartment with her partner and her cat and has a permanent job with a company in the capital. She has traveled and lived abroad as a child, is well-educated and fluently writes her diary entries in English



the street and wonders if it is time for her and her partner to leave Iran.

The foreboding only gets worse as the anniversary of Amini's death gets closer.



AUGUST 11, 2023

The countdown on Instagram showing how many days are left to the anniversary of Mahsa's murder makes me so anxious. My sleep schedule has gone down the drain. If it wasn't for work, I would definitely lose track of the days.

I'm trying to stay busy and keep my and my loved ones' spirits high, but it's not easy with everything going on in the world.

I still don't wear the goddamn head scarf, but the number of women who have gone back to wearing it is heartbreaking, and you can't blame them. No one wants to be forced to go to a court-ordered psychiatrist or have to give up using their phone or go to jail!



someone like you and maybe share a smile,
but it's becoming harder.

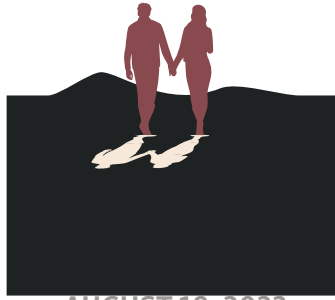
In our intimate circles, we are all the same,
but I don't know long we can keep this up,
and the circles are getting smaller and
smaller. Just last night, another couple left
for another life outside of Iran, and we
don't know who will be next. Maybe
ourselves?!

The countdown on Instagram is really
doing a number on my mental health.

A reunion with a former flame reminds Nesa of the innocence
of her youth, when it seemed people perhaps took the hijab
requirement less seriously and the head scarf was not a cause
célèbre.



makes Nesa forget her current troubles.



AUGUST 18, 2023

My best friend/ex-lover who was in town for a month left.

It's called summertime sadness, right? Everyone is having summer romances, making summer mistakes, eating summer fruits in this very summer weather.

He made things easier. He reminded me of simpler times. He made me feel at ease.

We were together when my dad died, when his mom died, when my mom got cancer. I saw him get married. He saw me fall in and out of love.

He once called me his eternal friend, and he was once the love of my life.

"Was" being the operative word here.

This past month reminded both of us why we didn't work out. I drive him crazy; he is too nonchalant for my taste.

On his last night in town, the three of us sat at the kitchen table and laughed so hard about stupid little things that I almost forgot we're in the middle of a renaissance and a revolution.

But only almost, because the next morning I had to go to work, and while walking to



tell me to wear the goddamn head scarf.

The pressures of patriarchy are increasingly evident every time Nesa steps out in public. As the battle between women eschewing the hijab and the hard-liners trying to keep them in line plays out, she expects to be confronted by men on the street.

Her worries are well-founded. Even before the protests that engulfed Iran over the past year, rights groups had highlighted the daily harassment and violent attacks on women by pro-government vigilantes seeking to enforce the hijab law.



Iranian women – one of them not wearing a head scarf – walk on a street in Tehran during the revival of the morality police on July 16, 2023. (Majid Asgaripour/WANA via Reuters)

But with more and more women going out in public without the hijab to show their solidarity with the Women, Freedom, Life movement, conservative-minded men appear to have become more emboldened to carry out the bidding of the morality police.

Not all men, though, as Nesa finds out when one man comes to her defense after she is harassed on the street.



AUGUST 25, 2023

*It's as if our bodies are
public property.*



commented the guy, something I usually don't do because I'm scared of what they might do.

A guy was walking next to me and told me that I was being filmed by someone leaning on his motorbike.

I stopped. So did the person who told me. I confronted the man and asked him what he was filming, because what I wear to work is usually modest. I no longer wear a manteau, but I know how to dress appropriately for the workplace.

He gave me a smirk that sent chills down my spine. He looked at me the way a farmer looks at cows or sheep to buy.

I felt disgusted.

But that wasn't even the worst part. What he said next made me feel worthless.

He said with a condescending look that I was not worth his time, and I should move along.

What I did was almost a knee-jerk reaction. I slapped his phone out of his hand, although what I wanted to do was slap him across the face. I wanted to spit in his face. At that moment, all the years of oppression, patriarchy, and sexism turned into a flaming ball of rage.

He was furious, but his fury was nothing compared to mine, and I think he saw it when he turned back after picking up his phone.

I wanted him to say one more thing and the next slap would be to his face. I was ready for the consequences.

My fellow sisters were being held, detained, and imprisoned for far less. I was ready to pay my dues. I was ready.



a man -- the same man that alerted me to him filming -- came to defend me.

The guy thanked me for my bravery and asked if I needed him to walk with me the rest of the way. I thanked him and said no.

You think this is a story of bravery and change and men and women standing up for each other. But for me, it has been soul-crushing and spirit-shattering.

I can't forget the way he looked at me when he said I wasn't worth his time, or the way he felt entitled to film me in the first place. I feel more exploited than I have ever felt because that is the reality. They feel entitled, and they feel they own us.

I don't know how to regain the strength to fight.

Step by step. Day by day. Street by street.

As the anniversary of Amini's death draws ever closer, Nesa tries to keep her mind clear by busying herself with routine tasks. But her inner fears are ever present, and she cannot erase the memory of the man who harassed her on the street the week before.



SEPTEMBER 1, 2023

I can't snap out of it.

Everything seems normal. I go to work. I do my yoga. I hang out with my friends. But his grin and his face keep popping up in the back of my mind.

Everything is a fog – a fog of stress and anxiety, exacerbated by this stupid hijab bill.

Do I have the stamina? Is there any fight left in me?

My head is spinning. Is this really our life? Is this really happening to us? I feel like we Iranian women are having a collective out-of-body experience. A collective nightmare.

We're bound to wake up from it.

We're bound to snap out of it.

We're bound to prevail.

We have to. There is no other way, no other option.

It is getting harder and harder for Nesa to control her emotions as the anniversary date casts a pall over every aspect of her life. Drawing on her memories of living abroad, she yearns to be able to buy items many people around the world take for granted -- like reasonably priced cat food and over-the-counter medicines that actually work.

Such imported items are often either banned or simply unavailable in Iran. Nesa's desire to have access to them leaves her feeling guilty that some of her reasons for protesting against the establishment might be misguided.

But trivial or not, they still serve as a motivating factor to keep up the fight.



SEPTEMBER 8, 2023



inconveniences. Burst into tears almost immediately.

Even while writing this diary, I have to keep tissues on hand to wipe away my tears.

I have no control. The fear of the unknown has consumed me. It's like we can all hear the bomb ticking.

Ticktock. Ticktock.

And boom. It will blow us all into oblivion.

If I go out on the street and don't come back this time, will I be the straw that broke the camel's back? Will I be the sacrifice that was needed to see this thing through? Or will it be another futile attempt at achieving something that wasn't meant to be? Should we just give up and accept our fate?

Have we come this far to just give up?

We deserve better. I deserve better. Heck, my cat deserves better. I am fighting for proper cat food that doesn't cost a fortune.

The stress has made my churning stomach 10 times worse, and my acid reflux has flared up again. I can't find the proper medicine for it in the pharmacy because the importation of anything foreign is banned and the Iranian stuff doesn't work.

I'm fighting for decent heartburn medicine to be stocked at my local pharmacy, believe it or not.

Am I fighting for trivial things instead of for bringing down the regime for the betterment of humanity? Maybe I am, but if the idea of access to medicine and better cat food can help me keep going, so be it.

So yeah, if we're not all pushed into the abyss, we'll have proper cat food and

S0011:

With summer drawing down and schools and universities about to open, Nesa heads to Tajrish, an area on the capital's outskirts anchored by its namesake market and square.

Tajrish is renowned for its bustling nightlife -- and for its role as a protest hot spot. In the early days of the nationwide street demonstrations that broke out one year ago, Tajrish echoed with the chants of angry protesters demanding justice for "Jina," as Amini is affectionately known.



A woman sits in the alfresco dining area of a cafe in the Tajrish commercial district in northern Tehran without wearing her mandatory Islamic head scarf on April 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

During the nationwide demonstrations, some women and girls removed and burned their head scarves. Other women cut their hair in protest.

They were met with legions of riot police, who over the course of the next few months would draw international criticism for their ruthless and deadly crackdown on the protests.

The authorities cut mobile phone and Internet service, arrested and harassed protesters and their families, and fired shotguns, assault rifles, and other forms of lethal force against crowds.



SEPTEMBER 13, 2023



faces of defiance.

Cutting hair, dancing freely, talking back, taking back the streets, daring to speak of the unspeakable: freedom.

But we are far from finished. From the draconian hijab bill to the pro-government vigilantes and the security forces waiting for protesters, no one is safe.

As we come close to the anniversary of the murder of Jina, we are preparing for demonstrations and the world is gearing up for "Mahsa day."

We are facing another slowdown of the Internet and the increased presence of police on the streets. Last night, we were having ice cream in Tajrish and two cops were going shop to shop telling owners they would have to close by midnight until September 16.

Telling shopkeepers to close on one of the busiest streets in Tehran, when everyone is trying to make the most of the last summer evenings before the start of the school year with a late-night treat, shows the authorities are scared.

They're scared of the prospect of people flocking to the streets, and they don't want protesters to use shops as refuges.

While eating my ice cream, I couldn't help but imagine what the streets will look like come Saturday. I don't know if my shivers were from the ice cream or fear of what awaits.

Whatever happens, we can't sit idly by. We will honor Jina and her legacy. We will stand together and make our voices heard -- through tears and blood, if it comes to that.



Diary entries have been edited for clarity.

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