

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

THE INTERNATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE IRANIAN WOMEN'S REVOLUTION

*Understanding and supporting the potential
of the world's first women-led revolution*

A POLICY PAPER BY *NADEREH CHAMLOU*

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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

The protests that erupted in Iran in mid-September 2022 were people's reaction to the death of Mahsa Amini, the young Kurdish-Iranian woman who died after being arrested and beaten by the regime's morality police. The uprising has since been dubbed 'the revolution of 1401' (the current Iranian calendar year that coincides with 2022). With the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom', it is being considered the world's first women-led revolution and has attracted global praise. The Financial Times selected Iranian women among this year's 25 most influential leaders, and Time Magazine chose them as this year's heroes. The revolution has commanded the respect of politicians, artists, civil society, and citizens at large who have pushed for an unequivocal reversal of their nations' policies vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. To shed light on the nature of the Iranian protest movement and provide guidance to policy shapers and human rights advocates, this policy paper tackles several timely questions: what sparked this revolution? What are the unique characteristics of GenZ, born between 1997 and 2015, the generation that is at the forefront in opposing the regime? And in the light of the ongoing protest's broader international implications, what must the international community do to: help the uprising succeed in Iran; safeguard women's rights; and inspire democratic movements worldwide?



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

- **Greater solidarity from women's rights activists and international bodies.** UN Women and UNICEF need to take a stronger stance against the regime's excessive force and atrocities against girls and boys. Violence against women, such as rape as a tool for torture, has been widespread since the outbreak of the protests, as have been indiscriminate killings of innocent child bystanders and executions. The crimes deserve greater condemnation by these bodies. Especially absent have been global feminists and women from Muslim-majority countries in expressing their support for Iranian women; for the most part so far only Afghan, Turkish, and Tunisian women's advocacy groups showed solidarity.
- **Facilitating dialogue to overcome internal divisions.** Longstanding and pervasive sanctions have excluded Iranians from the many fora that have welcomed other nationalities. Bi-lateral and multi-lateral organisers, public or private, avoided interaction with Iranians for fear of violating US-based sanctions. Even funding for capacity building was scarce or limited. Added to this constraint has been the immense fragmentation among Iranians, within or outside of the country, partly because of past grievances or the fear of regime reprisals against any type of association. While Iranians have now come together to fight against

the Islamic Republic, they still need to find common ground and build a pluralistic agenda to reduce future friction and division. The West could facilitate these exchanges. Furthermore, support for the movement has come mainly from Europe and North America, with a noticeable absence from Asian democracies, such as Japan and South Korea, which could influence the behaviour of the regime, particularly by stopping the wave of executions of arrested protestors.

- **Preparing Iranian women for leadership and decision-making.** *Iranian women have been excluded from leadership and decision-making over the past four decades. The few that could infiltrate the otherwise male-dominated corridors of power had family connections or had to demonstrate adherence to the regime's ideology, for which the strictest version of hijab was a litmus test. Such conditions crowded out a wide spectrum of qualified women and pushed them out of important government appointments or elected positions. Therefore, Iranian women could benefit from the type of political/leadership bootcamps that helped Afghan and Iraqi women gain skills to sit at the table with their male counterparts in the wake of the collapse of their respective regimes. While there are many women among the diaspora with leadership expertise, women living in Iran need training in the fields of, inter alia, constitutional law, economics, legal reform, communications, negotiations, leadership, campaigning, parliamentary processes. Such competencies could help to ensure women's inclusion in Iran's future; few if any were present for the drafting of the 1906/11 and 1979 constitutions, which had dire consequences for women.*

THE ORIGINS OF THE IRANIAN WOMEN'S REVOLT

The Iranian women's struggle for equal rights began in the mid-nineteenth century, around the time of similar movements in the West. Nonetheless, the clergy and the prevailing, deep-rooted patriarchy marginalised women at important historical turning points. For instance, women took an active role in the decades-long constitutional movement of the late nineteenth century but were left out of the 1906/1911 constitutions, which

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categorised them as second-class citizens and gave them rights on par with criminals and the mentally impaired. Between 1925 and 1979, their agency and advocacy did however find the receptive ears of the two Pahlavi monarchs who—despite the strong resistance of the clergy—saw women’s emancipation as an important dimension of their broader modernisation agenda. They gradually paved the way for the expansion of women’s rights with the 1934 abolishment of the veil, the 1963 right to vote and be elected, the 1967 progressive family law that afforded women as much equality as was feasible in the context of the time, and the affirmative environment for women’s social and economic inclusion.

” *Revolutionaries who had promised human rights swiftly marginalised women when they abolished the monarchy ... Yet the lingering taste of social freedoms compelled Iranian women to resist* ”

The revolutionaries of varying ideological stripes, who had fought the Pahlavis for decades with the promise of respect for human rights and inclusive democracy, swiftly marginalised women when they established the Islamic Republic in 1979. Except for the right to vote, all

other legal gains were reversed or diluted: the compulsory veil was reimposed, and women were excluded from many arenas on the grounds that Islam supposedly predefines their role as mothers and wives. Iran has consistently been considered to be among the most misogynist regimes in the world. It is ranked fourth lowest on the 2022 World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index and also receives one of the worst scores of any nation from the World Bank’s Women, Business, and Law Report for its many gender/sex-based legal barriers.

Yet the lingering taste of social freedoms and legal rights enjoyed for some decades, and the considerable capabilities gained during the half-century Pahlavi era, compelled Iranian women to resist the Islamic

regime's archaic gender ideology. Women pushed back at every critical policy juncture, mobilised innovatively, and expanded their presence wherever they could, such as in sports, education, the arts, and culture. A visible example is the steady transformation of the hijab rule, which has morphed from the regime's favoured strict full-length black chador into the short colourful flirtatious body-contouring fashion that has become ubiquitous on Iranian streets. Iranian women have found even this version still too intrusive because of its compulsory nature. Recent visitors to Iran say that women go increasingly unveiled, and on 4 December 2022, some regime officials suggested that the morality police had been disbanded, which was soon denied. The hijab, together with the belligerence toward America and Israel, constitutes a critical ideological pillar of the regime. Even if the rumours had been true, it would still have been too little too late to appease the population. Nevertheless, the steady transformation of hijab fashion over the years is a clear victory for women. And the regime considers such encroachment or abandonment an existential threat.

IRREVERSIBLE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS FUELLING THE REVOLUTION

While most analysts attribute the inevitability of a next revolution to Iran's young population (seventy percent of its eighty-four million are born after 1979), there are other distinctive undercurrents that help to explain why the GenZ cohort has a different mindset than previous generations, despite the regime's incessant Islamic indoctrination. These factors are that this generation 1) grew up in small families, 2) has a high number of educated women, 3) was

” *Several factors - smaller families, more educated women and informed mothers, later marriage and motherhood, technological shifts - have produced a generation at odds with the Iranian regime* ”

raised by mothers who are considerably more informed and self-assured as they married and became mothers later than preceding generations, and 4) functioned in real or virtual environments that are melting pots of views and ideals. These conditions have produced a generation that is secular and open-minded. They lived a dual life, where at home they could be who they are, but outside, they had to pretend and conform to norms that they found irrational and unacceptable. They have tired of such duality, particularly when their aspirations and values clash with a regime that has again decided to double down on its dry orthodoxy and has blocked any possibility for dialogue or reform.

1. SMALLER FAMILIES. The Pahlavi regime introduced in 1967 a population policy that began to spread the practice of modern family planning. But the revolutionaries discontinued it on ideological/Islamic grounds. The high cost of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and reconstruction led the regime to bite the bullet and reintroduce family planning, sealing it this time with Islamic tenets. It led not only to a rapid fertility rate decline—from 5.6 in 1988 to as low as 1.8 in 2010—but also to a homogenous pattern among all population groups and regions. It targeted convincingly conservative women, and more importantly men, which was unique for a Muslim society. Having between one and two children is now the norm, and the average household size has declined from 5.1 persons in 1976 to 3.3 in 2020. This means that small unitary families are prevalent and unlikely to include relatives, where hierarchy can reinforce patriarchal structures, with elders ranking above youngsters, and men over women. Research shows that larger households

” *Particularly GenZ boys and girls raised in smaller family settings see each other as equal peers rather than through the regime-imposed gender lens* ”

tend to be more religious, politically conservative, and are likely to treat men and women differently. Small families provide a more egalitarian playing field for a son and a daughter in terms of resources, household chores, and educational opportunities. As such, younger Iranians and particularly GenZ boys and girls, who are raised in smaller family settings, see each other as equal peers rather than through the regime-imposed differentiated gender lens. This could explain the presence of young men in the protests who

beyond the slogan of ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ are ready to fight and die for the rights of their sisters. For them, women’s bondage is also their bondage—a different mentality than that of the 1979 men, who were ready to push women aside and comply with the regime’s gendered exclusions.

2. MORE EDUCATED WOMEN. A defining feature of contemporary Iranian society is that women have become more educated than men. In pre-1979 times, the clergy discouraged conservative parents to send their daughters to school or university on the pretext that it would corrupt them. With the ‘Islamisation’ of all public space, this pretext no longer applied. Girls quickly closed the gender gap in primary and secondary levels, and increasingly sought tertiary education. As university slots are allocated based on nation-wide ‘Concours’ entrance exam scores, women gained ground and have made up about 60 percent of students for the past 20-25 years, and 70 percent in STEM fields. Today’s women see themselves as capable as men but feel frustrated by legal restrictions and the male-dominated ecosystem that holds them back. The female labour force participation rate stands at a mere 17 percent, among the lowest worldwide. Despite this low participation rate, female unemployment is at 16 percent and skewed toward tertiary educated women.

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3. DELAYED MARRIAGE & INFORMED MOTHERHOOD. In 1979, the average marriage age for women was 19.7 years, when the legal minimum age was 18. Despite the Islamic Republic’s lowering of the legal marriage age for girls to 13, the average marriage age has increased to 23.1, an increase of more than three years and a formative age for young women to shape their values, likes, and dislikes, and learn how to navigate their way in society. As they then face and must mitigate everyday gender discrimination, they become de facto agents for change. Women have also steadily delayed motherhood. In 2021, for instance, the majority of first-time

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mothers were between the ages of 30 and 34. Educated and more mature mothers, who have had to rein in their

aspirations because of state-imposed discrimination, are raising new generations with informed modern values that persist and withstand the regime’s dogmas.

4. URBANISATION & TECHNOLOGY. Iran’s swift rise in urbanisation and internet usage has caused irreversible social transformation. In 1979, less than forty-five per cent of the population was urban; in 2021, seventy-five percent of Iranians lived in cities, a sixty percent faster urbanisation pace than the rest of West Asia. Over 85 percent of the population is on the internet, using VPNs to bypass the ubiquitous filtering by the regime. COVID accelerated online literacy and usage. Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, WhatsApp, Clubhouse, among others, have become everyday tools for individuals and businesses to connect and network beyond their immediate families and geography. With declining trust in government-run national broadcasting, Iranians obtain their news and entertainment from Persian-language stations abroad, which not only enjoy press freedom but typically oppose the regime. A notable phenomenon is the extent of networked internet gaming among the youth, which seems to have played a role in the ongoing uprising. It is estimated that there are 42 million gamers within Iran. Security forces have caught up to the relevance of gaming for protestors and recently blocked ‘Clash of Clans’ over concerns that regime critics might be using its in-game chat functions to coordinate protests. Mohsen Shekari, an active gamer within an extensive network, was the first protestor to be executed. He was sentenced to death for purportedly blocking a street, setting fire to a trash can, and injuring a security person.

ONE REGIME MISSTEP TOO MANY

These favourable demographic shifts and trends could have propelled economic and social progress. But Iranians have had to endure backbreaking economic hardship due to the regime’s stubborn

commitment to its nuclear program, widespread corruption, mushrooming nepotism, historic mismanagement, and a series of astounding cases of embezzlement. Instead of reforms, the regime set out to tighten the circle of insiders by staging presidential and parliamentary elections that were clearly engineered to consolidate power and pave the way exclusively for hardliners.

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Regardless of lofty promises to address the many longstanding shortcomings, the Raisi government opted for more draconian social policies, among them authorising the notorious morality police to take harsh measures vis-à-vis women who wore looser hijab. Horrific incidents of brutality were regularly posted on social media and enraged citizens. And when the news of the arrest and death of Mahsa Amini broke, people simply had had enough. Within hours, protests broke out across the country, particularly in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchistan, but surprisingly also in cities and villages that were hardly household names. The regime was caught off guard and reacted with its characteristic brutality, transforming protests by students and school children into deadly encounters. As of 4 December 2022, over 18,000 protesters have been arrested and close to 500 have been killed, among them some sixty children and one hundred women. People no longer think that reform is an option or a possibility. They now want regime change: a revolution.

INTERNATIONAL REACTION, ACTION, AND INACTION

The protests inside Iran united the eight-million-strong dispersed Iranian diasporas across all political stripes who rarely saw eye-to-eye. While still

” Despite widespread global solidarity and steps taken by national, supranational, and international bodies, far more international action is needed to support the Iranian people in their quest for democracy ”

excluding the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), the other groups--such as the monarchists, republicans, and nationalists--have so far joined forces and see collaboration as the only way to chart Iran’s future and the end of the Islamic Republic. Impressively large demonstrations in Europe and North America have become routine. Such activism has been supported by Western

civil society, artists, and citizens, who see it as a genuinely modern, sophisticated, and rights-based movement. It has led Western countries and the European Union to revisit their policies and national interests vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. New sets of sanctions, a break in or downgrading of diplomatic relations, and the expulsion of regime insiders are some of the actions that have so far been initiated. An important step has been the vote of the UN Human Rights Council to establish a truth commission, and the US has initiated the process of removing Iran from the ECOSOC Gender Council. Yet far more international action is needed to support the Iranian people in their quest for democracy (for three tangible policy recommendations, see pp. 1-2 of this policy paper).

In Persian mythology, a blacksmith by the name of Kaveh rose up to liberate Iranians from the despotic and bloodthirsty Arab ruler Zahhak. Iranians have for some years speculated that Iran’s next ‘Kaveh’ will be a woman, who will free them from the yokes of the Islamic Republic. Recent experience and revelations confirm that the regime is rotten and corrupt. While Iranians have attempted many times since 1979 to reform the regime, they have had to retreat when faced with extensive brutality. By many accounts, the current phase seems and feels different. Iran has

undergone profound demographic and social change that is visible in its GenZ. Its courage and values are widely admired, and its aspirations are seen as progressive, rightful, and inclusive. If it succeeds, developments in Iran can have vast implications for the rest of the region, the Muslim world, the empowerment of women, and democratic movements. The international community can benefit greatly from such a positive outcome in an otherwise troubled neighbourhood.

” *Keeping the spotlight on Iran is of utmost importance ... If this revolution succeeds, it can have vast implications for the rest of the region, the Muslim world, the empowerment of women, and democratic movements* ”

Iranians cannot and will not go back to the day before Mahsa Amini’s death. Too much has happened, too many innocent lives have been lost, and too high a price has already been paid. The international community has so far supported the movement. Its continued backing could make a great difference. Keeping the spotlight on the developments in Iran is of utmost importance.

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About Women without Borders (WwB): We are an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.