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“The Women Of Iran Have Been Demanding Freedom Since 1979”: Iranian Writer Kamin Mohammadi Explains Why The Latest Protests Are Different

Kamin Mohammadi

The video shows a young man sitting in his room singing poignant words into a mic: ‘For being able to dance in public. For the fear of kissing a lover on the street. For my sister, for your sister, for our sisters...’

This is Shervin Hajipour, an Iranian singer with two million followers on Instagram, and this is the protest song that broke the internet with 40 million views. And the lyrics that have been making people cry the world over are actual Tweets from Iranians stating why they are protesting. That's why this song landed Hajipour in jail in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The video was deleted from his social media and his phone went silent until he was released on bail a week or so later. However, in spite of being charged with 'spreading propaganda against the system' and 'instigating violence', having his passport confiscated and being likely forced to put up an Instagram story in which he distanced himself from the song, Hajipour's song is still being blasted out of every car, every house, every protest, and sung at solidarity protests across the world, from NYC to Milan.

Hajipour joins hundreds of protesters and activists arrested over the past six weeks in Iran. They include at least 35 journalists and many artists, intellectuals and students. Human rights groups [estimate those killed at 201](#) people and those arrested at [15,000](#) – by the time you read this newsletter, these figures will undoubtedly have grown.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, strict Sharia law prohibits women from showing their hair in public, from singing or dancing, and from going out with any man they are not closely related or married to. Since the revolution of 1979, Iranian women have been obliged by law to wear

a *hejab* (head and body covering) when they appear in public.

Since the election of hardline president Ebrahim Raisi last year, the notorious morality police have been cracking down on women's 'bad *hejab*', which can mean just a few strands of hair showing. As many now know, in mid-September, a young Kurdish Iranian woman called Mahsa Amini was visiting Tehran when she was stopped by the morality police for bad *hejab* and taken for 're-education'. She was in custody for just two hours before she was so badly beaten that she ended up in hospital in a coma.

She died from her injuries.

The authorities claimed that she had suffered a heart attack, but her family deny that she had health issues. Protests began in front of Kasra hospital and have spread through the whole country in the weeks since then, despite a brutal crackdown that has the regime's forces shooting into the crowds. In response to this brutal killing, the enraged women of Iran took to the streets to tear off their headscarves and cut their hair in public. A sign of mourning, it is also a potent protest at the mandatory covering of hair. They danced around fires burning their headscarves and they walked the streets shaking their hair in the wind. These women – and men – who are protesting are not against Islam. As the protests attest, religious Iranians stand shoulder to shoulder with those who are against the *hejab*.

The point is the right to choose. And not just whether to wear the *hejab* or not, but for simple human rights that the rest of us enjoy without thinking twice.

These demonstrations have swept across Iran, from the metropolis of Tehran to small provincial towns and everywhere the chants are the same – we stand united for a free Iran, and ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’.

The women of Iran have been demanding freedom ever since Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979 – the first demonstration against mandatory *hejab* was three weeks after Khomeini’s arrival. Before the revolution, Iranian women had some of the most liberal laws in the Middle East; they could wear what they liked, they could rise to be judges, and they had been voting since 1963. Significant uprisings led by women have taken place in 1999, 2005, 2009, 2017 and again in 2019.

In reality, the Iranian people’s struggle for freedom and democracy goes back more than 100 years. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was quashed by imperial Russia and Britain. In 1953, democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who nationalised Iranian oil, was removed in a coup engineered by the CIA and MI6 – up until that point, Britain had received 87% of the revenue from Iran’s oil and, after the coup, America also got a slice of the lucrative Iranian oil pie.

This round of protests feels different to what has come before. Partly because the casual way violence is meted out to women in the street has become shockingly commonplace, but mostly because women themselves are just not taking any more. The brave women of Iran – overwhelmingly Gen Z – are stepping out into the streets, not just into the demonstrations but increasingly in everyday life, without their heads covered. They are carrying the fury of generations of women who have been repressed and oppressed by this regime. And the most inspiring thing about watching the protests is the unbreakable unity the Iranian population is showing; a grassroots movement with no leaders, which is able to swell and grow even as the internet is shut down in Iran.

As an Iranian woman who has lived in exile from my country for 43 years, I am sad to report that I have become accustomed to the rollercoaster of hope and disappointment that follows each uprising in Iran – inevitably they end in bloodshed, mass slaughter and the crushing of any organised opposition. However, in these past weeks, in spite of the brutality of the crackdown, I have found myself tucking a tiny bit of hope in my back pocket. The unity and courage shown by the Iranian people has enabled me, for the first time in decades, to imagine a new, free Iran where I could walk the streets of Tehran feeling the wind in my hair and leaning in to kiss my man in public – ordinary things that for us have been unimaginable.

And this touches us all. I sit here in Europe and combat the helplessness I feel by amplifying the voices coming out of Iran – with the internet shut down in many places in Iran, with Western media’s lack of attention – this is a real help we can give the Iranian people; to bring their voices and share their videos with the world. The frontline of feminism right now is in Iran, with women walking into bullets for the simple right to be able to choose what to wear, and how to live. What feminists and minority rights activists everywhere can learn from the current protests in Iran is to stop factionalising, to stop pitting men against women, gendered against non-binary, homo against hetero, but to embrace our commonalities to make communities of hope bonded together in the fight for change.

To help the Iranian people, please post as much as you can using #MahsaAmini. To support Shervin Hajipour, please visit his [Spotify](#) account and download his music to make sure he becomes too famous to be killed.

Kamin Mohammadi is a writer and journalist. Her memoir about Iran, [The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter To Iran](#), is published by Bloomsbury. Her website is [kamin.co.uk](#) and you can find her [@kaminmohammadi](#) on Instagram and Twitter