**Breaking the false glass ceiling**

Sharmila Faruqi

Wednesday, Sep 28, 2022

In Iran, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini passed away due to police brutality which had placed her in hospital with life-threatening injuries. Her family has also accused the police of having covered up the extent of the brutality they had committed under the guise of enforcing morality.

Amini was beaten and kept in unnecessary custody by Iranian police for not wearing the headscarf correctly. The social and political unrest which had been brewing for years in the making, finally boiled over and sparked nationwide, leading also to global protest. All around Iran, women were seen chopping off their hair, shaving their heads, and burning the headscarf symbolically.

Across Iran, these protests have been met with violent police responses to suppress and dissuade the protesters. There has been a nationwide restriction of internet access due to the primary planning for the protests gaining support over social media. Security forces have clashed heavily with the public, even using live fire and shelling with tear gas to discourage the protests and assault the protesters.

The severity of the clashes has been such that 41 people have been killed, with many more being arrested in just the northwest province of the country. Those arrested included many men who were standing in solidarity with women. Protests are turning into riots with protesters setting fire to items on the streets including vehicles, as well as throwing rocks at the police.

The World Economic Forum’s report on Global Gender Gap Report for 2022 ranks Iran at 143 out of 146, with a gender parity of 16 per cent. Iran’s laws related to women have not changed much since the 1979 Iranian revolution, where Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership was established. Women’s clothes have been more extensively policed and the age of marriage for girls is still between 13 and 15 years old. Women are also not allowed to divorce their husbands without extensive legal battles and the rate of women versus men in the job market is still a huge gap to close for Iran, despite a good education rate for women. In tort cases, women are entitled to half as much and counted as ‘half a witness’.

Will Mahsa Amini’s death be the final straw in the continued struggle for freedom that Iranian women suffer through? Or will her death be in vain?

In the case of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was given 38 years in prison in 2019 for defending a woman speaking out against the mandatory headscarf, she was charged with committing a crime against national security. This form of state sanctioned brutality must be stopped and women must be empowered; whether they choose to wear a headscarf or not should have no interference from the law.

It is devastating that the life of a young woman has been lost to police brutality for not wearing the headscarf ‘appropriately’ according to the laws of the country.

State brutality must be heavily condemned, and this incident should be investigated transparently, not in the dark from media. So far Iran’s response to this incident has been unsatisfying, both on a national and an international level.

The UN has raised concerns and demanded accountability as well, in response to the protests taking place. In an interview, Professor Javaid Rehman, a UN special rapporteur, has said: “This law violates fundamental human rights and violates women's inherent dignity. There are a number of reasons why people are coming out to protest. Iranian authorities have used excessive force against innocent protesters who are simply asking for their rights to be recognised”.

Although the situation seems bleak for Iranians as the state is much more intent on cracking down and controlling the innocent public violently rather than hearing out their demands and giving them their rights, this could be like another Arab Spring. Having gained enough momentum, this pro-choice movement might finally be able to bring about a much-needed change.

To put it concisely, in the words of Michelle Obama, “The difference between a broken community and a thriving one is the presence of women who are valued”.

The writer is a member of the Sindh Assembly.