[**Iran and the hijab**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712383/iran-and-the-hijab)

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SHE was a Kurdish woman who had been visiting relatives in the Iranian capital Tehran. Mahsa Amini (who was also called Jina) was out and about in the city when she was detained by the morality police for not wearing the hijab according to Iranian law. No one knows what happened in the time she was brought to the centre where the authorities impart ‘education’ about the proper hijab. The next time Amini’s family saw her she was [dead](https://www.dawn.com/news/1710846).

A photo circulating on the internet showed the 22-year-old woman before the detention; another showed her hooked up to various tubes, blood oozing from her ear. Her body appears lifeless even in the photo. Reportedly, a woman who had also been detained said that Amini complained she had been hit by the police. The state released a short CCTV clip which purportedly shows Amini collapsing.

In the meantime, a wave of [protests](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712267) has erupted in Iran.

The protests that began in Tehran have spread to cities and towns in most Iranian provinces. Led largely by young people they have included a wide variety of social classes and ethnicities. There are a number of issues that have caused the festering discontent in Iran — not least the horrendous condition of the Iranian economy, that has faced international sanctions for years, and corruption in the bureaucracy.

Also enervating for many have been examples of how unapologetic some Iranian leaders are in indulging their nepotistic tendencies.

It is all of these factors that form the seething background for the current protests. At its heart lies the struggle over the hijab — over which Mahsa Amini was arrested and likely killed in custody. Iran’s ruling clergy considers the hijab to be a requirement for all Muslim women.

It is a convenient belief because in the era when politics from the United States to everywhere else has become mostly about performance, imposing the hijab also makes for excellent political theatre. Just like the reinstated Afghan Taliban in Kabul, Iran’s conservative circles can look around at the women present in the public spaces of their country and get an instant power high about their own might.

Similarly, hungry for power highs, Islamophobic politicians from parties such as Marine le Pen’s National Rally in France and Narendra Modi’s BJP in India want to forbid the wearing of the headscarf and appeal to an ignorant and self-serving version of secularism or Hindutva supremacy.

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The truth is far simpler: no state, whether it is the Iranian or the Saudi, the French or the Indian, or any other, has the right to tell women what to wear.

**Editorial:** [*Iran hijab protests*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1711859)

At its heart, the struggle over the hijab shows just how eager male-dominated state machineries are to use their power to force women to do one thing or another. In some countries, power is signalled by forcing women to wear the hijab, in others to force them to take it off. In either case, the idea is that women can be ordered to do this or that.

This is why it is so heartening to see Iranian women leading these protests. Many have cut off their hair or burned their headscarves even as the Iranian authorities use deadly force to quell their convenings. Having borne the brunt of the Iranian state’s denegration and being treated as subhuman, dragged into vans and detained by an increasingly repressive morality police at the slightest ‘provocation’, they have had enough. So they have been marching, even though the danger to their lives and the overall cost is huge.

The state had recently announced that at least 41 protesters and police had been killed but the number is likely to be much higher as Iran has vowed to “deal decisively” with the protesters.

Here in Pakistan, women know a few things about repression and patriarchal control. One video from the streets of Tehran shows a middle-aged, bearded man on a motorbike almost pushing his face through the window of an adjacent car as he yells and screams at the women inside for their improper hijab. Raining abuses on them and trying to intimidate them, he does not stop until traffic around them forces him to move. Any Pakistani woman who can drive or who has spent any time on the streets would not be surprised at a similar move.

In the past decade, drivers, motorcyclists, grocery shop clerks, restaurant owners, really anyone at all in the public realm, have similarly become an expert in how Pakistani women should and should not be dressed. In these cases, it is always the women who have to be defensive because angry men have all the rights in Pakistan. ‘Mera jism meri marzi’ is at the centre of the Pakistan’s women’s movement, and is being reflected in Iran.

This is just why Pakistani women have an important role to play as allies in Iranian women’s struggle against bodily control by the state.

Even though Western feminists in white-majority countries are eager to jump in, Iranian women are rightly rebuffing those offers, because they taint what is a local and grassroots struggle in a country where half the population is just fed up of the repressive status quo. When white and Western feminists get involved it is not about the struggle but the rescue, and how Iranian or Pakistani or Somalian women are being ‘saved’ by the ‘real’ feminists who are also the white feminists.

Even though the internet has been blocked in many parts of Iran, many tweets, pictures and slogans, are still emerging through those with VPN servers. Pakistani feminists must make it their business to amplify the voices of Iranian women who are fighting and protesting and showing the world what true feminist courage actually means.

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