

Death Penalty Is a Feminist Issue in Iran

written by Elahe Amani | April 16, 2025



Pakhshan Azizi, Sharifeh Mohammadi, and Varisheh Moradi

At first glance, the death penalty might appear to be a matter of law or human rights, rather than a feminist concern. But in Iran, where gender deeply shapes legal outcomes, the question becomes urgent: why should feminists care about capital punishment? The answer lies in how the Iranian judicial system applies the death penalty—often through a lens that erases the lived realities of women, particularly those who have endured abuse, trauma, and systemic violence.

Women who resist the regime, speak out for their rights, or challenge patriarchal structures face a unique and brutal form of repression. Feminists—across their many perspectives—are committed to justice that is nonviolent, equitable, and conscious of how power operates along gender lines. By engaging with the death penalty, they expose not only its cruelty but also its gendered application, framing it as a tool of state control that intersects with issues of gender, class, race, and sexuality. Feminism opposes the death penalty because it reinforces violence, denies justice to the most vulnerable, and forecloses the possibility of healing and transformation.

Iran's human rights record has come under intense scrutiny due to a disturbing rise in death sentences. Amnesty International in a report published on April 8th on death sentences and executions globally shockingly report that recorded executions hit their highest figure since 2015. In 2024, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia accounted for 91% of all recorded executions, and were among the five countries with the highest number of executions. The report also states that while "Iran executed 119 more individuals than last year (from at least 853 to at least 972) - accounting for 64% of all known executions" globally.

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At least 54 individuals have been sentenced to death on political or security-related charges, with numerous cases tainted by due process violations and unfair trials. This alarming trend is particularly concerning for women's rights activists, who are increasingly targeted by the regime. Among the most notable cases are those of

- Pakhshan Azizi, a humanitarian worker and civil society activist sentenced to death for her involvement in protests and activism;
- Sharifeh Mohammadi, a human rights defender facing the death penalty for her activism; and
- Varisheh Moradi, a women's rights advocate sentenced to death for her membership in an opposition group to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

These cases not only highlight the regime's brutal suppression of dissent but also underscore the growing risks for women who dare to challenge the state.

The post-"Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising has seen a significant increase in harsh sentences, with many prisoners facing execution. The Iranian government's use of the death penalty as a tool of political repression has raised concerns about its human rights record. Iran has long been notorious for its high number of executions, but in 2024, the country has seen an unprecedented increase in the application of the death penalty, with 972 executions recorded, making it the world's leading executioner per capita. While many of these executions have been carried out for alleged drug-related offenses, which do not meet the international legal thresholds for capital punishment, an increasing number of political prisoners have also been sentenced to death, reflecting a dangerous shift in the Iranian regime's approach to dissent.

The case of the three women—Azizi, Mohammadi, and Moradi—serves as a stark reminder of how political repression is increasingly intertwined with gender and how the Iranian state uses the death penalty not just as a tool of state control, but as a means to silence the voices of women who dare to challenge the regime. The political executions in Iran, particularly of women, demonstrate the convergence of the state's misogynistic and authoritarian tendencies, where women's political agency and activism are punished with violence.

The feminist perspective on the death penalty in Iran reveals a complex interplay between gender, power, and the legal system. Feminism has always been about more than just gender equity. At its core, it is a struggle against all forms of domination. It represents an ongoing pursuit of justice, autonomy, and dignity for all people, especially those who have been pushed to the margins of society.

The death penalty in Iran is applied disproportionately to women who are involved in political

activism, particularly those who challenge the status quo of patriarchal governance. The three women currently facing death sentences—Sharifeh Mohammadi, Pakhshan Azizi, and Varisheh Moradi—are emblematic of this broader trend. They were all arrested in 2023 during the crackdown of the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, which have been a significant source of dissent against the oppressive policies of the Iranian regime.

The involvement of women in political movements is seen as a direct challenge to the patriarchal order in Iran. Women like Mohammadi, Azizi, and Moradi are not only protesting against policies that restrict their freedoms but are also asserting their right to exist as equal and autonomous individuals. This act of defiance against the state's patriarchal control over women's bodies, voices, and lives can be interpreted as a feminist act in itself.

However, the Iranian state does not tolerate such defiance. Women who engage in political movements are often labeled as threats to the nation's stability, branded as enemies of the state, and subjected to extreme punishments, including the death penalty. In this context, the death penalty serves a dual purpose: it punishes political dissent and reinforces the state's control over women by attempting to silence those who challenge gendered power structures.

In many cases, the death penalty in Iran is disproportionately applied to women who are themselves victims of gender-based violence. The women who are sentenced to death penalty are not simply cases of crime, but often stories of survival in the face of deep, systemic harm. The Legal and Judicial Magazine of the Iranian Lawyers Foundation, in an article titled "The Most Famous Cases of Iranian Female Murderers," notes that "the story of Iranian female murderers has a strange and complicated story, with many cases taking years to reach a conclusion." Behind these delays are lives marked by child marriage, domestic abuse, and long histories of violence. Rather than acknowledging these structural injustices, the legal system often punishes women harshly, failing to consider the contexts of their actions or the traumas they have endured.



According to Iran Human Rights, approximately 70% of women executed for murder had killed their male partners, frequently in acts of desperation after enduring prolonged abuse. In 2024, at least 31 women were executed in Iran—the highest number in 17 years—many of whom faced charges stemming from situations like domestic violence or forced marriage. These cases underscore how the Iranian judicial system often disregards the lived realities of women, punishing them harshly without adequately considering the contexts of their actions or the traumas they have endured.

The death penalty sentence of political prisoners, including those of the three women, are part of a broader strategy by the Islamic Republic to quash dissent and suppress any opposition to the government. The regime has increasingly used the death penalty as a tool to intimidate protesters and activists, using the threat of execution to create an atmosphere of fear and silence those who speak out against it. Feminists argue that the criminalization of political activism and the subsequent use of the death penalty reflects a patriarchal attempt to control and erase the voices of women who dare to oppose the regime.

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One of the most disturbing aspects of the Islamic Republic's use of the death penalty is the lack of due process and the frequent reliance on forced confessions extracted under torture. Political prisoners are often denied access to legal counsel and subjected to sham trials, which violate

international standards of justice. In many cases, the “confessions” used to convict individuals are obtained under duress, highlighting the regime’s systematic disregard for human rights.

The death penalty in Iran is disproportionately applied to members of ethnic and religious minorities. As noted in the case of the three women, those facing execution are often part of marginalized communities, which have historically faced systemic discrimination in Iranian society. These minorities, including Kurds, Baloch, Turks, Arabs and other nationality and ethnics communities, are often targeted by the regime for their involvement in political activism, and the death penalty is used as a means of further suppressing their voices.

The intersection of gender and minority status makes the experience of facing the death penalty even more complex for individuals like Mohammadi, Azizi, and Moradi. These women, as members of minority communities, are subject not only to gender-based violence but also to ethnic and political persecution. Their executions would serve as a warning to other women and minority communities that resistance to the regime is not tolerated.

The use of forced confessions extracted under torture is a hallmark of the Iranian judicial system, particularly when it comes to political prisoners. The regime often uses these confessions to justify the death penalty, despite their inherent unreliability. For instance, the cases of Mohammadi, Azizi, and Moradi are likely to involve confessions that were coerced under duress, and the trials that led to their death sentences were marred by serious due process violations. Feminist scholars argue that these confessions are particularly problematic when applied to women, as they often involve the criminalization of women’s political agency. In the case of the three women, their participation in the Woman, Life, Freedom protests was not only a political act but a direct challenge to the patriarchal control that the regime seeks to maintain. The forced confessions extracted from them serve to criminalize their resistance, effectively punishing them for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

The execution of political prisoners in Iran, especially women, is a gross violation of international human rights law. Iran’s continued use of the death penalty for political crimes is condemned by international organizations, including Amnesty International and Human rights watch and United Nation Human Right Council which have repeatedly called for the abolition of the death penalty and the release of political prisoners.

However, international governments, particularly those engaged in diplomatic relations with the Iranian regime, have largely remained silent in the face of these executions. The silence of the international community only serves to embolden the Iranian government, allowing it to continue its brutal campaign against dissent.

Feminist activists and human rights organizations argue that global pressure must be applied to Iran to end the use of the death penalty for political dissidents. Governments must speak out against these executions and demand an end to the systemic persecution of women and minorities in Iran. The international community must hold the Iranian regime accountable for its violations of human rights, particularly its abuse of the death penalty as a tool of political repression.

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The increasing use of the death penalty in Iran as a means to silence political dissent and marginalize women is a deeply troubling practice of Islamic Republic of Iran. The cases of Pakhshan Azizi, Sharifeh Mohammadi, and Varisheh Moradi highlight the intersection of gender, politics, and state violence, with the death penalty being used as a tool to maintain patriarchal control and suppress women's rights. Feminist activists and human rights organizations must continue to push for the abolition of the death penalty in Iran and for the release of political prisoners who have been unjustly sentenced.

The struggle for women's rights in Iran is intrinsically linked to the fight for justice and human rights for all. The death penalty sentence for political prisoners, particularly women, are not just a violation of individual rights but a direct attack on the feminist movements that are challenging the oppressive structures of power in Iran. It is time for the international community to act, to demand an abolition and an end to executions, and to support the women and men who continue to fight for freedom, dignity, and equality in Iran.

In conclusion, the death penalty in Iran, particularly as it relates to all political prisoners and women, is not only a matter of legal justice but one of feminist struggle. The execution sentence of Azizi, Mohammadi, and Moradi highlight the intersection of state violence, gender inequality, and political repression, and the fight to end these death penalty sentences is a fight for justice, equality, and human rights. Feminists, both within Iran, in Iranian diaspora and internationally, must continue to demand abolition of the death penalty in Iran. Abolishing the death penalty is not just a legal reform, it is a commitment to a more humane and hopeful tomorrow.

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