

Suppression of academics and school training in Iran during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution

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Abstract

For the past 6 months, there has been an ongoing revolution in Iran after the brutal death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini in morality police custody. Iranian universities’ professors and students have been on the frontline of this revolution and have been fired or sentenced. On the other hand, Iranian high schools and primary schools have been under suspected toxic gas attack. In the current article, the latest status of oppression of the university students and professors and toxic gas attack on primary and high schools in Iran has been evaluated.

Key words: women right, freedom in education, toxic gas attack

Over the past 6 months, the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution in Iran has inspired more than 16 articles in scientific journals around the world, including 5 articles in *Lancet* (Devi 2022a, 2022b; Horton 2022; Kabir 2022a, 2022b), 4 articles in *Science* (Madani 2022; Nazemi 2022; Staff 2022; Nazemi 2023), 3 articles in *Nature* (Catanzaro 2022; Dehghani 2022; Catanzaro 2023), 1 article in *Autophagy* (Klionsky 2022), 2 articles in the *British Medical Journal* (Dyer 2022; Geetanjali and Howard 2022), and 1 article in *Nature Medicine* (Sabeti 2023). We add to these voices by focusing on academia and school oppression during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution in Iran.

On a cold December day in 1948, 3 years after the desolation of the Second World War, the United Nations gathered in Paris and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all the world to hear. Notably, Article 26 of that Declaration stated loud and clear:

Everyone has the right to education.

Everyone.

Seventy-five years later, the rest of the world can only watch in horror as the Islamic Republic regime in Iran brutalizes its own citizens for the crime of wanting to educate their daughters and see them live free and access basic human rights. In recent months, several reports have been published regarding the expulsion, arrest, imprisonment, and torture of students and professors for their support of, and participation in, nationwide antiregime demonstrations in Iran, following the death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022.

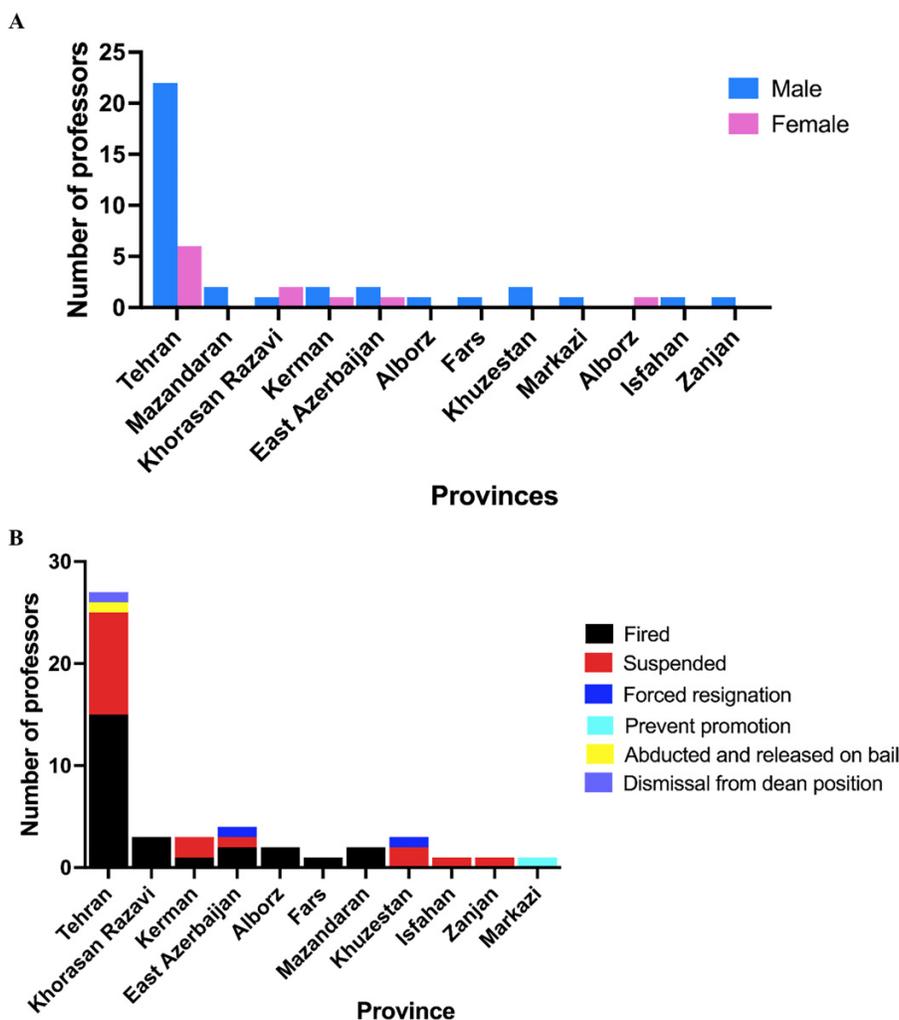
After the tragic death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini in morality police custody, over an accusation as trivial as loosely wear-

ing her hijab, civil unrest quickly spread across cities and towns in Iran against the current oppressive government, with women leading the protests under the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom”. During the unrest to date, the security forces of the regime have killed more than 600 people (Chen 2023) and detained over 30 000, including hundreds of students (Blackman 2023). Following sham trials, protesters have faced inhumane punishments—including the death penalty.

Despite the sheer violence of the state-sanctioned crackdowns against them, universities have been at the forefront of the revolutionary movement in Iran, and have continuously organized sit-ins on campuses. A shocking number of professors and students have been both fired and suspended for merely expressing solidarity with demonstrators, let alone actively demonstrating with them. According to the latest report on 23 February 2023 by human rights activists and Iran’s Student Union Council (International Community of Iranian Academics 2023), at least 21 professors have been suspended, fired, and banned from all educational and research facilities for accompanying and supporting the rights of students (Figs. 1A and 1B). Since then, four more professors have been fired, three more professors have been suspended, one more professor has received a written notice, and a female professor was abducted for about 3 weeks and released on bail based on the last report on 1 March 2023 (Moridinejad 2023).

Reports released on 24 February 2023 have announced that a staggering 680 students (Fig. 2A) were arrested during the antiregime protests, with dissident female students comprising nearly half of them (Fig. 2B). Since then, 46 more students

Fig. 1. University professors affected by the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution in Iran. (A) Distribution of gender in different provinces of Iran in university professors affected by ongoing revolution in Iran. (B) Sentences of university professors in different provinces affected by Iran’s ongoing revolution.



have been arrested, based on the last report on 16 March 2023 (Academics 2023). We have summarized the frequency of student arrests across the country in different provinces in Fig. 2B. The exact number of professors and students affected is yet to be determined. Students have been punished for a term of more than 10 years of imprisonment (Fig. 2C), with the hardest hit among the provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Sistan and Baluchistan. The overall oppression of academics across Iran has been shown in Fig. 2D.

Yet even in the face of such relentless brutality, scores of students and professors continue to protest. They refuse to attend classes until their demands are met, including but not limited to the unconditional release of all detained students, cancellation of arrest warrants for released students, and lifting of academic suspensions. In a cruel response to this show of integrity and solidarity, the regime has expelled and banned students from their academic institutions.

Crueler still, over the past 5 months, more than 13 000 Iranian primary and high school students (Fig. 3A)—mostly

schoolgirls (Fig. 3B)—have fallen ill due to an alarming wave of toxic gas attacks. According to the most recent human rights activists’ reports, over 280 schools (Fig. 3C) in at least 30 provinces have been affected across the country (Fig. 3D) (collected by Azimaei 2023). Based on the UN reports, Islamic regime in Iran has repeatedly rejected UN’s independent fact-finding committee to investigate alleged abuses, particularly those committed against women and schoolgirls (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5267-situation-human-rights-islamic-republic-iran-report-special>). Although the causes of these attacks need to be further investigated, it is widely believed—and with good reason—that female students are deliberately being targeted in a coordinated attempt to terrorize them and their families. Schools have been one of the main centers of antigovernment protests since September 2022. When you couple that fact with the Iranian regime’s utter hatred of women, the result is something as horrific as little girls being gassed in their classrooms.

Fig. 2. University students affected by the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution in Iran. (A) Distribution of university students arrested by the ongoing revolution in different provinces of Iran. (B) Distribution of gender of the university students arrested by the ongoing revolution in different provinces of Iran. (C) Different sentences of university students affected by the ongoing revolution in different provinces of Iran. (D) Visualization of university students affected by the ongoing revolution in different provinces of Iran.

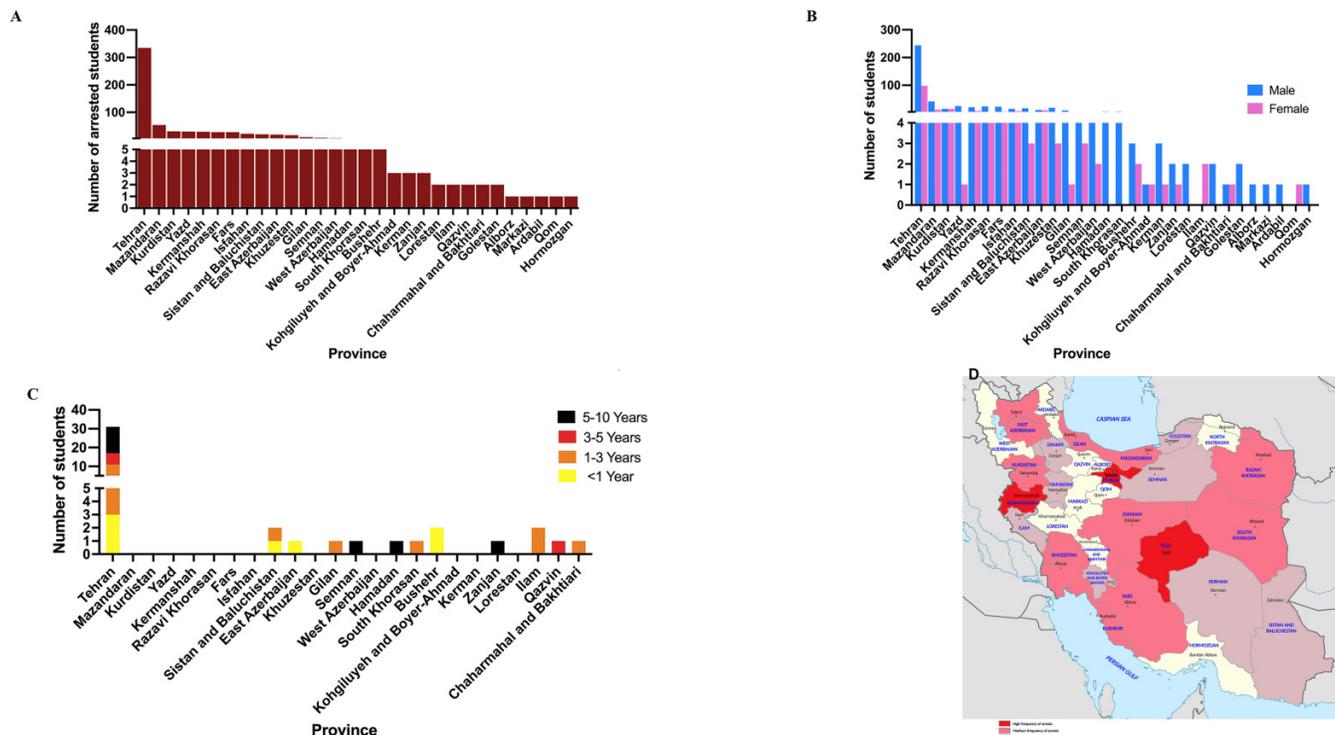
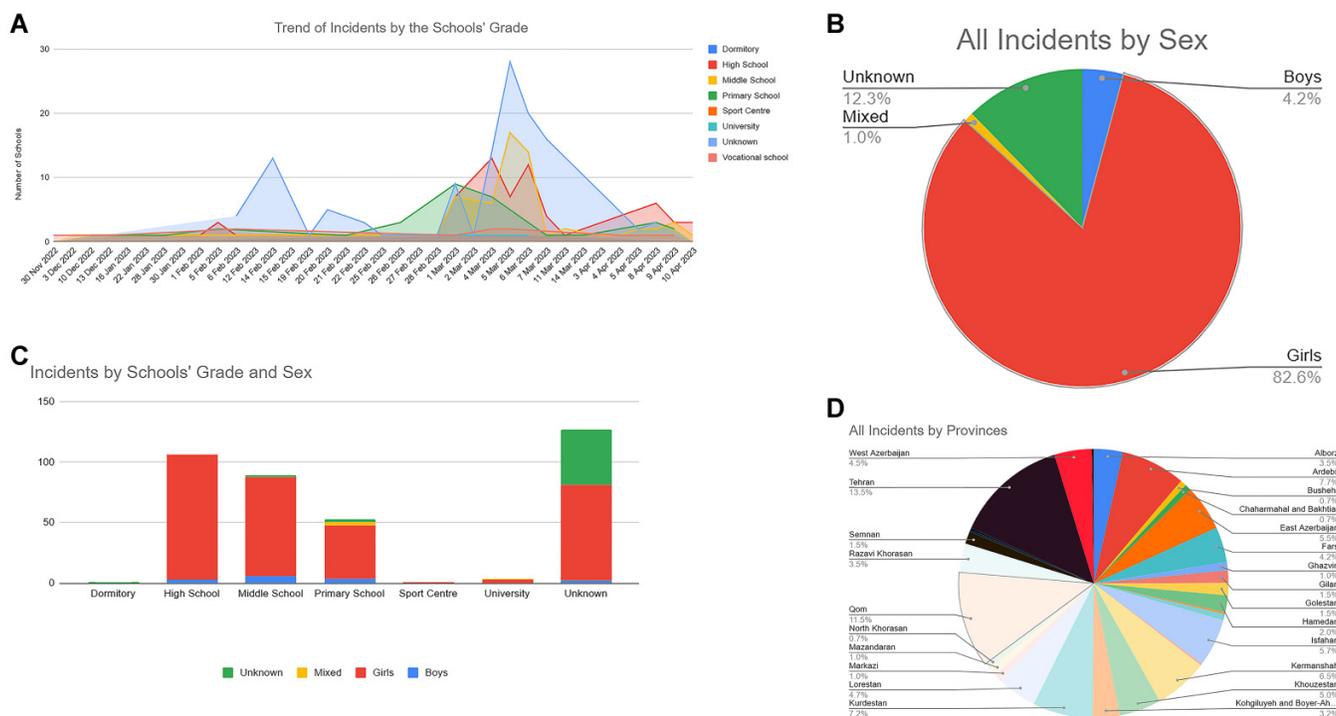


Fig. 3. School poisonings during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” revolution in Iran. (A) Trends of school poisoning incidents by different school grades. (B) Distribution of gender in school poisonings. (C) Distribution of gender in different school grades in school poisonings. (D) Percentage of school poisonings in different provinces of Iran. All panels in this figure were updated by 4 May 2023.



It does not have to get worse. The horror can—and must—end. As they did in 1948, the majority of the world's nations today support free education for all and have stood in solidarity with the women-led protests in Iran. They have voiced their support for the brave Iranian girls and women fighting for their fundamental freedoms and have called for an immediate end to state violence. In line with this, Canada and numerous other countries have unequivocally condemned the brutal crackdowns and have acted against systemic violations of the rights of Iranian women and protesters by the Islamic regime.

We, a group of international faculty members, researchers, emeritus faculty members, and alumni university students, are strongly urging regime officials to stop indicting professors and students with charges punishable by imprisonment, expulsion, and the death penalty for participation, or alleged participation, in peaceful demonstrations. It is important to note that the systematic restriction or ban on girls' education, and depriving students of education by Islamic hardliners are a matter of international concern. We urge universities around the world to voice their opposition and come up with strategies to mitigate the impact, such as implementing fast-track applications for Iranian students and scholars at risk. Scholarships could be created to offer a safe place for Iranian women and equity-deserving gender identities to continue their studies and achieve their goals. The universities could conduct educational events such as teach-ins and film screenings to continue involvement of community and sharing of news and knowledge. Money donation and supporting human rights organizations such as Center for Human Rights in Iran, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch will serve an important role of assistance and documentation. Additionally, governments worldwide should take proportionate actions, and NGOs should act accordingly.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate the following authors who have read the paper, provided feedback, and confirmed and supported it, especially Anusheh Saleem for helping us improve the final text of the article.

Arash Aghamohammadi Sereshki, Ershiya Bagheri, Lindsay Barnam, João Basso, Iman Beheshti, Nyree Bridgman, Paola Brun, Giovanna Lurati Buse, Selina Capizzi, Walter J. Chazin, Courtney Clark, Amanda Clifford, Marco Cordani, Laura Croci, Simone C. da Silva Rosa, Wojciech Dabrowski, Janice Dodd, Timothy J. Ebner, Sherif Eltonsy, Gregory G. Evans, Raziieh Farzad, Pejman Ghelich, Kishorchandra Gohil, Mehrnaz Hadian, Mansour Haeryfar, Benedikt Hallgrimsson, Grant Hatch, Richard B. Hawkes, Bryan Heit, Mohammad Heydari, Sajjad Heydari, Joanne San Juan, Ebrahim Karimi, Tracy Karuhogo, Stephanie Kermorgant, Jason Kindrachuk, Amir Kiumarsi, Mohammad Kiumarsi, Daniel J. Klionsky, Aylin Kohan, Rozhan Kohan, Hashem Koohy, Paniz Koster, Katarzyna Kotfis, Liisa Kuhn, Afsaneh Lavasanifar, Marek J. Los, Hassan Marzban, Caroline Mauvezin, Dana Medoro, Bahram Mirani, Syamak Moattari, Marco Molinari, Lara Evelyn Mollocana, Milad Momeni, Mikayla Moody, Helya Morajabi, Maryam Moridnejad, Regan Moses, Sahar Mottalebi, Negar Partow, Christo-

pher Pascoe, Stevan Pecic, Michael R. Pinsky, Jacob Quint, Hossein Raeesi, Fatemeh Rahimi Balaei, Maryam Rahimi Balaei, Katayoun Rahnnavard, Kazem Razzaghi, Chiara Robba, Mahmoud Rouabhia, Najmeh Saffar, Faramarz Sahra Gard, Anusheh Saleem, Ayesha Saleem, Golrokh Salehian, Nitesh Sanghai, Housman Savoji, Dedmer Schaafsma, Karl Schilling, Tannin Schmidt, Leinhard Schmitz, Masood Sepehrimanesh, Lotfollah (Lot) Shafai, Pawan Sharma, Indranil Sinha, Holger Stark, Raffaele Strippoli, Izumi Sugihara, Ali Tamayol, Maria Ines Vaccaro, Rut Valdor Alonso, Carla Vitorino, Rui Vitorino, Emilia Wiechec, Charles Yin, Renne Zahedi, Mehdi Zakeri, Ali Zarrabi, Bing-Wen Soong, Jean Mariani, Nicolas Dupré, Kathleen J. Millen, Mario Manto, Christopher M. Gomez, Hirokazu Hirai, and Andrea Leonardi.

Article information

History dates

Received: 31 March 2023

Accepted: 11 May 2023

Accepted manuscript online: 19 May 2023

Version of record online: 12 June 2023

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Data availability

Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Formal analysis: SS

Investigation: SS, SG

Methodology: SG

Project administration: SG

Visualization: SG

Writing – original draft: NT

Writing – review & editing: SS, SG

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

Funding information

The authors declare no specific funding for this work.

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