

Mahsa Amini and Human Rights

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I saw a photograph yesterday of a man, his back to the camera. He was lifting his shirt, and his back was covered in painful marks, each one fresh, raised and bright red, caused by pellets from a pellet gun. He had been using his body as a shield to protect women burning their hijabs in protest over the murder of Mahsa Amini.

I start with this image, the image of a man's back, because this is not a women's issue. The murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the so-called "morality police" in Iran for not wearing a hijab over her hair (although reports say her hair was in fact covered), reportedly beaten into a fatal coma in the police van, is not a women's issue.

Just like the murder of 23-year-old Jyoti Singh, who boarded a bus in Delhi on her way home from the movies when six men, including the bus driver, savagely raped her, beat her with an iron rod, and bit her all over her body, is not a women's issue.

Just like the shooting of 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai, who survived, shot in the head by Taliban on her school bus ride home, for her writings in support of girls' education, is not a women's issue.

Mahsa Amini's death on September 16 sparked mass protests all over Iran, most of the participants in the protests are women.

Jyoti Singh's death, in 2013, sparked mass protests all over India, most of the participants in the protests were women.

Malala Yousafzai's shooting in 2008 sparked protests all over Pakistan, most of the participants women.

But the rape and murder of women, and the murder of women over allegedly showing their hair, or seeking an education, these are not about women. And I know that what I should say is that they are not about women, they are about humanity. But what I want to say is, it is about men. And men must awaken, and recognize this, and rise up themselves against the brutality of their fellow man, and demand change.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn wrote in their book, “More girls were killed in the last 50 years, precisely because they were girls, than men killed in all the wars in the 20th century. More girls are killed in this routine gendercide in any one decade than people were slaughtered in all the genocides of the 20th century.”

This is not just a women’s issue. This is about all of us. But how does it change for you if you think about it as primarily about men? This demands a men’s movement calling for self-control, self-regulation, education, support, consequences. And until the attack on women is met with courageous male protest, and male acceptance of responsibility and accountability, then men are turning their backs, and not in the heroic way, shielding protesters from pellets.

It was in 1979 that Ayatollah Khomeini said, “Coquettish women, who wear makeup and put their necks, hair and bodies on display in the streets...have done nothing righteous. They do not know how to be useful, neither to society, nor politically or vocationally. And the reason is because they distract and anger people by exposing themselves.”

This was met with rejection from many women. One slogan from the post-revolutionary women’s movement was “We did not have a revolution to take a step backwards.”

Other slogans, however, were being spread at the time. “Wear a veil or we will punch your head.” And, “Death to the unveiled.”

In 1983, Parliament decided that women who do not cover their hair in public will be punished with 74 lashes. In 1995, they could also be imprisoned for up to 60 days.

Tens of thousands of people are protesting Mahsa Amini’s death, and there are countless videos of women protesters being beaten by authorities, dragged into police cars by their hair. Courageous women are burning their hijabs. There have been multiple deaths, of men and women.

Malala Yousafzai shared on her Instagram story this week: “Whatever a woman chooses to wear, she has the right to decide for herself. As I have said before: If someone forces me to cover my head, I will protest. If someone forces me to remove my scarf, I will protest. I am calling for justice for Mahsa Amini.”

At Mahsa Amini's funeral, her father interrupted the mullah's prayers and shouted, "Your Islam denounced her, now you've come to pray over her? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You killed her for two strands of hair! Take your Islam and go."

His words are powerful. He did not say, "Take Islam and go." He said, "Take **your** Islam and go." And by "your," he is calling out the fanaticism, fascism and nationalism that plagues so many places in the world, including here. Dean Obeidallah wrote about Professor Kristin De Mez, author of "Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation," who said that there's a growing and loud authoritarian strain in the movement [here in America] that would accept an end to democracy if replaced by an autocrat who delivered on its Christian nationalist dreams.

The enemy is not religion, it is not faith. It is the fanatic, theocratic, zealous lunatic fringe found in every culture, when armed with power, and permission to murder, maim, and claim it's in the name of God. You can take **that** Judaism, that Christianity, that Islam and go.

We stand with, and ask blessings for, the brave women and men who have risen up to defend human rights in Iran and around the world. Let their cry for justice be met with right action, with lasting change, and with true freedom.