

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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IRAN: URGENT INTERNATIONAL ACTION NEEDED TO ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MAHSA AMINI'S DEATH IN CUSTODY

The death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini (whose Kurdish name is Zhina) on 16 September 2022, days after she was violently arrested by Iran's "morality" police amid credible reports of torture and other ill-treatment, must be independently, impartially and effectively investigated and those suspected of responsibility brought to justice in fair trials. The Iranian authorities must also urgently repeal laws that impose compulsory veiling on women and girls, perpetuate violence against them and strip them of their right to dignity and bodily autonomy, and abolish the "morality" police which enforces these abusive and discriminatory laws.

Two weeks after Mahsa Amini's arbitrary arrest in Tehran, and 10 days following her death, the Iranian authorities have failed to properly investigate the circumstances surrounding her death in custody and take steps to bring those responsible to justice. Instead, they have repeatedly denied responsibility for her death, concealed vital evidence, and threatened her family and others questioning the official narrative and calling for justice.

Given the persistent refusal of the Iranian authorities to effectively investigate and provide accountability for the most serious crimes under international law, UN member states must urgently support the establishment of an international investigative and accountability mechanism by the UN Human Rights Council to address the prevailing crisis of impunity in Iran. Support for such a mechanism would send a message to the Iranian authorities that the most serious crimes under international law and other human rights violations, such as unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment, including against women for not complying with compulsory veiling laws, will not be tolerated.

ARBITRARY ARREST UNDER COMPULSORY VEILING LAWS

Mahsa Amini, from the city of Saqqez in Kurdistan province, was visiting Tehran with her younger brother on 13 September 2022 when she was stopped and arrested by Iran's "morality" police (*gasht-e ershad*), who routinely arbitrarily detain women who do not comply with the country's strict compulsory veiling laws, which force women and girls as young as seven to cover their hair and bodies.

According to eyewitnesses, "morality" police pushed Mahsa Amini into a police van and beat her during her transfer to Vozara detention centre in Tehran. According to an [interview](#) given by her brother on 14 September 2022, the "morality" police officials carrying out her arrest told them both that she was being transferred to the detention centre for an "educational" class run by the "morality" police aimed at "reforming" the behaviour of women and girls who violate the country's strict Islamic dress code. Her brother was also beaten when he voiced his protest at her arrest.

DEATH IN CUSTODY INVOLVING CREDIBLE REPORTS OF TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Within hours of Mahsa Amini's arrest, she fell into a coma and was transferred in an ambulance from Vozara detention centre to Kasra hospital in Tehran. She died in the hospital three days later, on 16 September 2022.

Prior to her death, when Mahsa Amini was in the intensive care unit of Kasra hospital, credible reports emerged from eyewitnesses that the "morality" police had subjected her to torture and other ill-treatment inside the police van, including through beatings to her head. These reports were swiftly followed by statements from the authorities who denied that she was tortured, providing implausible explanations for the reasons of her hospitalization and subsequently presenting bogus accounts of the cause of her death without carrying out impartial and full investigations.

As early as 14 September 2022, Mahsa Amini's brother said in a media [interview](#) that, shortly after her arrest the previous day, he and other families who were waiting outside Vozara detention centre for their detained female relatives suddenly heard screaming coming from inside the building. Shortly after, security forces emerged from the detention centre, fired teargas at all the families gathered outside and beat them with batons. He said that five minutes after this incident, an ambulance exited the building. He continued:

“My whole body is bruised and my eyes are still stinging from last night. Every girl who left the detention centre said: ‘They killed someone’. I showed the girls Mahsa’s picture and one of them said she was right next to Mahsa when this happened to her. I asked one of the soldiers¹ what had happened, and he said that one of the other soldiers was injured. They lied. Mahsa was in that ambulance. Half an hour went by from the time the ambulance left until the time I found out that my sister was in it. They took Mahsa [out of the detention centre] and I was still waiting for my sister outside Vozara.”

According to media interviews given by Mahsa Amini’s family and other information gathered by Amnesty International from informed sources, security forces beat her inside the “morality” police van following her arrest. In a media [interview](#) published several days after her death, her father said that, according to several other women who were arrested and detained inside the van alongside Mahsa Amini and who had contacted him after their release, a member of the security forces pushed and beat her. They also told him that the security forces beat her with different instruments.

A photograph of Mahsa Amini lying on a hospital bed, which was shared on social media on 15 September 2022, sparked further widespread outrage in Iran. On the same day, in an attempt to defuse criticism and refute eyewitness accounts that she was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in detention, the police information centre of Tehran [announced](#) that Mahsa Amini had suffered a heart attack, without providing any evidence. The authorities also released a [video](#) disseminated on state media that shows a woman, whom they claim is Mahsa Amini, suddenly falling to the ground and receiving medical care near the scene.

Claims of a heart attack have been strongly refuted by Mahsa Amini’s family. According to a [media](#) interview given by her mother and published before her death on 16 September 2022, Mahsa Amini was totally healthy prior to her arrest and had no medical conditions that would explain a sudden heart attack.

According to a statement issued on Kasra hospital’s Instagram account on 16 September 2022, Mahsa Amini was admitted to the hospital at 20:22 on 13 September 2022 after suffering a heart attack, showed no vital signs on arrival and was braindead. The statement continued that she was resuscitated by medical staff and kept in the intensive care unit for treatment, but she suffered another heart attack on 16 September 2022 and was pronounced dead the same day. The statement added that her body was sent to the Legal Medicine Organization (LMO), which is a state forensic institute falling under the authority of the judiciary, for further investigation. The statement was removed from the hospital’s Instagram account within hours of posting.²

During a [media](#) interview on 18 September, Mahsa Amini’s uncle said doctors at Kasra hospital had told their family that her brain tissue had been damaged, and that her kidneys and heart had failed. They did not provide further information or her medical records.

INDEPENDENT CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION NEEDED TO ESTABLISH CAUSES AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEATH

The duty to investigate potentially unlawful deaths is an essential part of upholding the right to life. For any death in custody, there is a presumption of state responsibility and the failure to investigate is itself a violation of the right to life. Investigations by authorities must comply with international law and standards and should follow the UN Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death, which provides a common standard of principles and guidelines in investigating potentially unlawful deaths.³ Investigations to establish the truth concerning the causes and circumstances surrounding deaths in custody must be prompt, impartial, transparent, effective, and thorough and must be carried out by independent and competent authorities, which have no institutional relationship with the detaining authority.

To date, despite numerous promises by officials including the president and the head of the judiciary, the authorities have yet to conduct a full transparent investigation by a body independent from alleged perpetrators or their influence. Official statements made about her death, including by those tasked with investigating it, absolving the authorities of responsibility, coupled with their concealment of vital evidence and threats against her family and anyone countering the official narrative, point to the impossibility of an independent and impartial investigation being carried out in Iran.

¹ In Iran, the word “soldier” is generally used in reference to a uniformed individual who has been conscripted into military service and is serving a mandatory term in the armed forces.

² A screenshot of the statement is kept on file by Amnesty International.

³ UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death, 2017.

The authorities' refusal to fully and adequately investigate Mahsa Amini's death is consistent with the long-standing pattern of impunity for crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities, including deaths in custody.

DENIAL, DISTORTION AND COVER-UP

Following Mahsa Amini's death, Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, ordered the Ministry of Interior to conduct an investigation into her death in custody. An investigation by the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for the country's police force and has a central role in defining its policies and practices, does not meet the criterion of independence under international standards and is not a substitute for a criminal investigation by an independent, impartial body.

Indeed, the Ministry of Interior's blatant lack of impartiality, and its inability to independently investigate its own departments, has been exemplified by recent prejudicial statements made by Iran's Minister of Interior, Ahmad Vahidi, even before the ministry's investigation has been completed. In an interview published on 24 September 2022 about the latest developments in the investigation into Mahsa Amini's death, he stated:

"The results of various investigations showed there was no beating [of Mahsa Amini] and there was no skull fracture. There are two matters in the investigation. In the first matter, we had to investigate whether the claims that the deceased had been subjected to beatings were correct or false. Upon examination of the camera footage and reviewing reports from Kasra hospital and the Legal Medicine Organization, it was found that there were no signs of beatings or bleeding from the brain. In the Legal Medicine Organization, it was officially announced that there was no fracture of the skull or crushing of the internal organs. The next matter was the cause of her death, and, for this, we have to wait for the final opinion of the Legal Medicine Organization."

In a pattern consistent with previous actions and statements made to absolve the authorities of accountability, he went on to claim that those who spread allegations that Mahsa Amini was tortured in custody took an "irresponsible, uninformed and biased position" and had collaborated with the United States and European countries, as well as "counterrevolutionary and terrorist groups, such as the *monafeqin*".⁴ Such statements give rise to concerns over the pressuring of eyewitnesses who were in the van of the "morality" police with Mahsa Amini and who, according to Ahmad Vahidi, were involved in the Ministry of Interior's investigations.

Similarly, in the days following Mahsa Amini's death, the commander of the police force in Tehran, Hossein Rahimi, gave several media interviews, absolving the authorities of responsibility before the conclusion of investigations. In one interview he said that: "This incident was unfortunate and I hope we do not witness such a situation...All the statements made online about the cause of death are completely false...we are asking people not to pay attention to the rumours...The police did not do anything wrong in this case."

CONCEALMENT OF VITAL EVIDENCE

Amnesty International is concerned that the authorities are concealing evidence, including the video footage and medical and forensic records, that may be key to establishing the causes and circumstances of Mahsa Amini's death. Her relatives also spoke out about the authorities preventing them from seeing her face and body prior to her burial, raising fears about their efforts to conceal visible injuries or marks.

Mahsa Amini's relatives, who have publicly called for an investigation into her death, have requested in vain for the family to have access to and review all the security footage that exists from inside the van and Vozara detention centre, as well as bodycam footage from the members of the "morality" police who arrested her.

On 19 September 2022, the commander of the police force in Tehran, Hossein Rahimi, said in a media interview that, although "prior to this incident, police officers were equipped with bodycams...on this occasion, they were not equipped with bodycams". He also claimed that Mahsa Amini's family have been given access to security footage. This additional claim has also been refuted by her father who, during a media interview published on 20 September 2022, said:

"I requested access to the footage from the cameras in the van and in the courtyard of Vozara detention centre, but they [the authorities] have not responded to me at all. All the video footage that [authorities have] published online has been censored. All of the things they say and the video footage they show are lies and we have not been able to understand anything."

⁴ *Monafeqin* (hypocrites) is a derogatory term the Iranian authorities use to refer to the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) and their members and supporters.

The authorities have also refused to provide Mahsa Amini's family with her complete medical records and autopsy report. On 19 September 2022, Iran International, an independent news organization based outside Iran, published several slices (images) from a CT scan taken from Mahsa Amini's torso and brain that it said had been leaked out of Kasra hospital. In response, state-affiliated media, Fars News Agency, immediately published a report confirming that the CT slices belonged to Mahsa Amini but claimed that investigations into them by medical professionals the news outlet had consulted showed no trauma to her brain and, instead, showed that she had previously undergone a tumour-related surgery on her brain.

These conclusions propagated by Fars News Agency contradict analysis provided to Amnesty International by three independent experts on forensic pathology regarding the images from the CT scan. The three experts informed the organization that the CT slices are incomplete. They told the organization that there appears to be an "odd 'radiolucency' in the right temporal region" which they are unable to explain without seeing the entire series of the CT slices.

On 21 September 2022, the LMO for Tehran province published its preliminary findings on Mahsa Amini's death. Mehdi Frouzesh, the director of the LMO for Tehran province, stated that "Upon physical examination and autopsy, no signs of injuries on the head and face, or bruises around the eyes, or fractures at the base of the skull were observed. In the autopsy of the trunk and abdomen, no signs of bleeding, crushing or lacerations were observed in the internal organs of the body." He also claimed that, according to Mahsa Amini's medical records, she had undergone brain surgery when she was eight years old. The authorities have not provided her family with a copy of the autopsy report or the LMO's preliminary findings.

Mahsa Amini's family immediately rejected the preliminary findings of the LMO of Tehran. In a media interview given the same day, her father said:

"They [the authorities] are telling lies. My daughter was never admitted to hospital with any illness."

In a previous interview, published on 20 September 2022, he had also said:

"What makes me sad is that the authorities and officials are spreading lies about my daughter every day. They said Mahsa had heart disease and epilepsy but, as the father who raised her for 22 years, I say with a loud voice that Mahsa did not have any medical conditions and was in perfect health... When we went to the hospital, they would not let us see Mahsa. They had covered her head and body so we would not see the bruises. I could only see my daughter's face and the soles of her feet... I was eventually able to see...bruises... The person who hit my daughter should be prosecuted...in a public trial... I will not allow my daughter's blood to be trampled on."

THREATS AGAINST FAMILY AND SUPPORTERS

In keeping with previous strategies of denial, distortion and cover-up, the authorities have tried to silence Mahsa Amini's family and threatened to prosecute anyone countering official claims about her death.

Even prior to Mahsa Amini's death, when she was still in a coma in hospital, authorities put her family under immense pressure through a heavy presence of security forces around the hospital. In a media interview published on 16 September 2022, prior to her death, her mother said:

"They [the authorities] have done this to my daughter... They have warned us not to speak to the media and to keep quiet. We are surrounded by security agents. They have to explain, for what reason they do this to an innocent [person]? She did not deserve this."

Following her death, the authorities pressured Mahsa Amini's family to quickly bury her body at night and warned them not to speak publicly about her death.

Authorities have also warned that anyone contradicting the state's version of the events surrounding her death will be prosecuted. On 18 September 2022, the Deputy Interior Minister for Security and Law Enforcement Affairs at the Ministry of Interior, Majid Mirahmadi, who has been appointed by Iran's Minister of Interior to head the investigation into her death stated: "Anyone who disturbs the psychological security of society, spreads fake news and disturbs the public mind, must answer for their claims because all these acts have been criminalized."

PATTERN OF SYSTEMIC IMPUNITY FOR DEATHS IN CUSTODY

The Iranian authorities' failure to conduct an independent, impartial and transparent investigation into the death in custody of Mahsa Amini fits into a long-standing pattern of impunity in the country.

In September 2021, Amnesty International published [research](#) into how the Iranian authorities have failed to provide accountability for at least 72 deaths in custody since January 2010, despite credible reports that they resulted from torture or other ill-treatment or the lethal use of firearms and tear gas by officials. Not a single official has been held to account for these deaths, reflecting Iran's long-standing crisis of impunity where allegations of torture and unlawful killings consistently go uninvestigated and unpunished.

The Iranian authorities typically blame deaths in custody on suicide, drug overdose, or illness such as strokes and heart attacks in a rushed manner and without conducting any independent and transparent investigations.

Family members of people who die in custody in suspicious circumstances are routinely subjected to various forms of harassment and intimidation by intelligence and security agents, particularly when publicly disputing the authorities' claims about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of their loved ones or seeking legal redress. Iranian authorities also have a documented track-record of pressuring families to bury their loved ones immediately and without an independent autopsy.

COMPULSORY VEILING LAWS PERPETUATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Mahsa Amini's arbitrary arrest and death in custody comes against a backdrop of increasing harassment and violent attacks against women and girls in recent months in Iran by police, paramilitary forces and vigilantes for showing strands of hair under their headscarves or wearing short and colourful overcoats, trousers or sleeves.

Under Iran's Islamic Penal Code, women who are seen in public without a headscarf can be punished with a prison sentence, flogging or a fine. The law applies to girls as young as nine, which is the minimum age of criminal responsibility for girls in Iran. In practice, the authorities have imposed compulsory veiling on girls from the age of seven when they start elementary school.

Tens of thousands of women and girls in Iran are routinely stopped in the street at random by "morality" police, who insult and threaten them, order them to pull their headscarves forward to hide strands of hair or give them tissues to wipe off their make-up. Women and girls are often physically assaulted including by being slapped in the face, beaten with batons, handcuffed and bundled into police vans. These acts amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which is absolutely prohibited under international law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Iran is a state party.

The policing of women's bodies is not confined to state agents. Iran's abusive, discriminatory and degrading compulsory veiling laws enable not only state agents but also thugs and vigilantes who feel they have the duty and right to enforce the Islamic Republic's values to harass and assault women in public. Consequently, on a daily basis, women and girls face random encounters with such strangers who beat and pepper-spray them, call them "whores" and make them pull their headscarves down to completely cover their hair.

Coercion by the state or by private actors to ensure compliance with rules on traditional, cultural or religious forms of dress violate women's rights to freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief and the right to privacy. Women and girls should be free to decide whether or not they want to wear specific symbols and dress on the basis of personal religious convictions, cultural customs or for any other reason.

BACKGROUND

The death of Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022 sparked [nationwide protests](#) in Iran. Security forces have responded to the protests with unlawful force, including by using live ammunition, birdshot and other metal pellets, killing [dozens of people](#) and injuring hundreds of others. The organization believes the real death toll is higher and is investigating further. Intelligence and security forces have violently arrested hundreds of people including protesters and bystanders. The authorities have also used the protests opportunistically to embark on a repressive crackdown on civil society through the arrest of scores of journalists, civil society activists, lawyers and other human rights defenders, including women's rights activists and those belonging to ethnic minority groups.