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# Rethinking the EU's Approach to Women's Rights in Iran

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## Introduction

After the death of twenty-two-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police on September 16, 2022, protests quickly spread throughout the country under the slogan of "Woman, Life, Freedom." Amini's death galvanized a movement that connects women's individual freedom to choose their dress code to the systemic social, political, and economic grievances of a larger population that is demanding fundamental change. In claiming the realization of their basic rights, Iranians are revolting against a system that not only oppresses women and peaceful dissent but also continues to fail to meet citizens' needs. This fight, which has attracted global solidarity, highlights the core message that when women's rights are marginalized to nonexistence, human rights for all are at risk.

The protests have taken place amid mounting repression of organized peaceful activism, a continuing deterioration of Iranians' basic rights, and a host of economic ills, including rising inequality, increasing poverty, [worsening living conditions](#), skyrocketing food prices, raging inflation, and rising unemployment. Three years of the coronavirus pandemic as well as decades-long comprehensive economic and financial sanctions have gravely added to the [socioeconomic calamity](#). On top of this economic insecurity, precarious and perilous working conditions had already sparked increasing [protests in Iran](#) in recent years, resulting in the government's harsh [crackdown on human rights activists](#) and civil society as well as further infringements on rights, including [internet shutdowns](#), even before current events.

Repression and the deterioration of Iran's socioeconomic conditions have aggravated the situation for women in particular. Especially in recent years leading up to the current protests, this trend has hindered Iranian women's ability to mobilize, protest, and achieve the full

realization of their rights. Those who experience intersecting discrimination because of their minority background or social status are impacted even more if they live in rural areas, which are less developed than urban ones, or in areas on Iran's border, which the state views predominantly through a security lens.

The international response to Iran's very poor human rights record and current protests, however, has lacked a holistic approach that considers women's key role as agents of change and encompasses civil and political as well as social and economic rights as integral components of women's rights. In fact, women's rights and gender equality are not only goals in themselves but also enable the realization of fundamental rights of other marginalized groups, such as children and minorities. Moreover, women's rights and gender equality are the strongest indicators of and preconditions for sustainable and peaceful societies, both internally and externally.

Yet, the European Union's (EU's) current approach to Iran does not account for this reality. Over the past years, the EU's policy toward the country has focused on negotiations to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after Washington's withdrawal from the deal in 2018. The current situation in Iran urgently highlights the need for a policy framework that responds to the government's repression and gross human rights violations and, equally, considers the disastrous socioeconomic situation in the country, which is a key obstacle to the public's ability to organize to realize its rights.

Given the importance of economic precarity and socioeconomic inequality in the current revolt, the EU should adopt policies that can support the protesters' rights and demands in the short term while considering a revised long-term approach centered on empowering Iranians in their efforts to create long-lasting democratic change.

## Legal and Other Barriers to Socioeconomic Equality

Iran has committed to national and international legal instruments that enshrine the equality of men and women. Despite this commitment, Iranian women face serious legal discrimination and barriers, including in their choice of employment. The Iranian constitution guarantees equal protection under the law and enjoyment of all human rights for men and women—in accordance with Islamic principles. While this provision includes everyone's right to freely choose a profession, it contains qualifications that continue to limit women severely.



Despite years of legislative battles, the Iranian parliament has not ratified the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW), the key international instrument aimed at ensuring gender equality. But Iran has ratified other human rights instruments that require equality for women and nondiscrimination. As such, Iran is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which underlines the indivisibility of political and economic rights. Under the ICESCR, signatories are obliged to “ensure the equal right of men and women” to all economic, social, and cultural rights set out in the covenant, including the right to work and fair working conditions and the right to healthcare and education. Iran has also ratified five out of ten of the International Labor Organization’s (ILO’s) [fundamental conventions](#), including those on discrimination and equal remuneration. However, Iran has yet to ratify the ILO’s 2019 [Violence and Harassment Convention](#), although it did vote in favor of it.

Yet, an array of discriminatory laws as well as formal and informal barriers restrict women’s equality, including equal access to economic opportunities. Among these are compulsory hijab laws; discrimination in Iran’s civil code and labor law and the absence of antidiscrimination legislation; and a lack of effective antiharassment laws. Hardliners’ consolidation of power and repressive political ideology have reinforced legal and social discrimination.

## **Compulsory Hijab Laws**

Discrimination in civil and political rights has a direct impact on women’s economic rights—and vice versa—and Iran does not have an antidiscrimination law to combat discrimination in practice. Compulsory hijab laws are among the most visible restrictions of women’s rights to freedom of religion and expression and, at the same time, curtail women’s right to study or work. In fact, mandatory hijab laws form a political instrument of repression that restricts many aspects of women’s public life and adds another barrier to equal access to employment. Virtually at every level, including in public office, women can [lose an employment opportunity](#) for not observing the Islamic dress code as interpreted by the authorities or company management. In recent years, authorities have tended to impose these increasingly unpopular laws through a combination of surveillance by artificial intelligence monitoring systems and economic coercion.

## **Discrimination in the Civil Code**

Under Iran’s civil code, men and women not only have unequal rights to divorce and in decisions over responsibility for children, but there are also several discriminatory provisions that limit women’s agency and access to the job market. A husband’s legal status as the head of the family allows him to choose where the family lives and prohibit his wife from obtaining an occupation deemed by a court order to be [against family values](#) or harmful to his or her reputation.

Iranian passport law also limits women's freedom of movement. A married woman requires her husband's permission to get a passport and travel, and men can revoke this permission for any reason at any time. While the law includes a mechanism to allow exceptions, these apply only in select cases of national interest and are no form of realistic redress for ordinary women. In recent years, several cases of [female athletes](#) who were prevented by their husbands from accompanying their teams to [international games](#) have drawn public attention and criticism.

## Discrimination in Labor Law

[Iran's 1990 labor code](#) includes provisions against forced labor and discrimination against women and sets out paid maternity leave. Article 6 prohibits forced labor and grants men and women the right to choose any profession they desire as long as it is not against Islamic values, the public interest, or the rights of others. Article 38 emphasizes that equal wages are to be paid to men and women who perform work of equal value in a workplace under the same conditions. However, Article 75 bans employers from employing women in any [difficult or hazardous occupation](#), which is defined as a job that poses additional risks or harm due to chemical, physical, or biological elements in the environment. Moreover, other than requiring equality in wages, the law falls short of ensuring nondiscrimination more broadly in relation to labor rights in hiring and promotions.

In 1992, the government developed employment policies for women that were meant to set out a framework for promoting women's employment. In fact, the policies designated certain professions, such as judges or firefighters, as male only, either because of the authorities' interpretation of sharia Islamic law or because of their claims that these professions' working conditions are unsuitable for women. In practice, it is quite common for employers in the public or private sector to set a required or preferred gender in job vacancies. In today's Iranian economy, more than 90 percent of [labor contracts](#) are on a temporary basis, which seriously erodes the protection of labor rights and access to social security.

## A Lack of Antiharassment Regulation

Iranian law lacks comprehensive provisions against sexual harassment. There is no clear definition of sexual harassment in legislation, including the labor code. Certain coercive sexual conduct, however, is criminalized in the penal code. Sexual intercourse by coercion or force—in other words, rape—with a woman is punishable by execution, and [“kissing and love making, if done by force,”](#) can be brought before a court.

A bill on [protection, dignity, and security of women against violence](#) has been in the making for over eighteen years and includes some provisions for protection against sexual harassment in work settings. Following substantial revisions by Iran's judiciary, the draft law came

before the country's parliament again in 2020. However, progress is unlikely in the current climate. In practice, private and public sector companies rarely have anti–sexual harassment policies, and public sector employers rely on morality codes that in reality do little to protect women from harassment and, instead, heavily interfere with their rights to privacy and choice of dress code.

## Consolidation of Power by Hardliners

Iran's hardliners have made great strides in consolidating their power over recent years, especially since the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the considerable loss by moderate and reformist parties of their power base. With the election of Ebrahim Raisi as Iranian president in 2021, the country is now fully controlled by hardliners. They have worked steadfastly to adopt policies shaped by an ideology that defines women's primary roles in society as mothers and wives and has long sought to marginalize them from public life, including in their social and economic participation.

One example is the change in Iran's population control policies, with comprehensive new laws adopted and quickly implemented after the hardliners' consolidation of power. Once a leading model in expanding [access to family-planning programs](#), the country has rolled back access to free contraceptives and instead invested in promoting childbearing. Based on a policy shift from a decade ago, lawmakers have adopted several pieces of legislation that discriminate against women by reinforcing their primary role as wives and mothers. In November 2021, Iran passed the [Rejuvenation of the Population and Support of Family](#) law, which restricted women's rights to sexual and reproductive healthcare. The legislation outlawed sterilization and the free distribution of contraceptives in the public healthcare system and further limited abortion and criminalized abortion providers.

One of the law's strategies for [increasing the population](#) was to raise the number of people who marry at younger ages, with incentives for those who do so, such as loans for married couples under twenty-five and financing for institutions that encourage early and child marriage. Such policies could further increase child and forced marriage, as Iranian law allows girls to marry at thirteen and boys at fifteen.

These pronatalist policies not only severely restrict women's bodily autonomy and reproductive choices. They also include provisions that reinforce women's stereotypical role as mothers while failing to include a mechanism that protects them from discriminatory hiring, which contributes to keeping women out of the workforce. Arrangements that support family care, such as nine months of paid maternity leave, an option to work from home for up to four months during pregnancy, and an option for women with children under seven to take leave for medical appointments, do not provide family leave options for men to act as caregivers too. Although the law includes protections that prohibit the firing or transferring of pregnant or breastfeeding women against their will, it fails to establish a comprehensive

antidiscrimination framework. Hence, public and private sector employers can continue to openly adopt discriminatory hiring and promotion practices in favor of men over women. As a result, stereotypical roles are reinforced, while seemingly protective measures are detrimental, as they appear intended as a mechanism to push women out of the workforce.

Most discriminatory provisions against women are enshrined in law or policies at the highest level. Yet, the political and social opinions of those in elected office, in particular the administration and the parliament, influence their stance and actions toward women's rights. For instance, while former president Hassan Rouhani's 2013–2021 administration fell short of promises of more substantial progress, the Office of Women and Family Affairs at the time did push for draft legislation to protect women from violence, and the administration took steps to appoint more women to high-level positions, such as governors and ambassadors. In contrast, the current Office of Women and Family Affairs supports child marriage and restrictive policies on family planning.

## Women's Lived Realities

Women are [main agents of change](#) in Iranian society and persevere in a struggle that connects their daily lives with social and political issues at a higher level—although the Islamic Republic has consistently tried to limit women's social and political roles and participation. The current revolt has made clear both the centrality of women's roles and the inextricable link between women's rights and human rights for all, most pointedly through the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom” (*Jin, Jîyan, Azadi* in Kurdish and *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* in Farsi). Despite facing serious legal and systemic discrimination, women have made [social gains](#)—in literacy, higher education, and healthcare as well as through a low birth rate, and getting married at a higher age on average—that have translated into developmental gains for the entire country.

Yet, some of these promising trends have been reversed over the last decade, which has been marked by increasing repression, social pressure on Iranians and on women in particular, a period of especially strict sanctions, and a serious economic downturn. In light of current protests, beyond women's objection to legal discrimination, it is important to consider how economic precarity and marginalization particularly affect women. On top of their direct impact on women's livelihoods, these factors limit women's ability to mobilize and effectively push for political change.

To efficiently support Iranian women in their different needs, it is vital to acknowledge the distinct identities and individual complexities behind the monolithic term “Iranian women.” Different educational backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, cultural backgrounds, and memberships in ethnic or religious minority groups—to name but a few factors—result in very different lived realities and, as a result, different needs and opportunities.

## Women’s Labor Market Participation

Iran’s worsening economic situation, which is due to corruption, mismanagement, and sanctions, has contributed to a decline in living standards for all Iranians, but women continue to fare worse economically than men. Before the start of the coronavirus pandemic, women’s economic participation rate in Iran was extremely [low compared with other countries in the region and globally](#). Although Iranian women had managed to increase their employment rate to over 17 percent in 2017–2018, their [unemployment rate](#) continued to be twice that of men, despite women making up over 50 percent of Iranian university graduates.

Aggravated by the pandemic and in combination with the [economic decline](#), [women’s employment rate](#) fell sharply to 14 percent in 2020. In absolute numbers, that represents 662,000 Iranian women who lost their jobs. Considering that only 5 million women are employed in Iran, a job loss of this magnitude is quite significant. As the country has emerged from the pandemic, men have largely recovered their job losses, but for women no such recovery has been noticeable.

## Additional Economic Hardships

The rate of female-headed households has increased over the past decade, and without adequate state support they are overrepresented among families who live in poverty. Two consecutive and compounding factors appear relevant to this trend. First, the poverty rate among female-headed households increased notably following the tightening of international sanctions in the early 2010s and again after the ramping up of U.S. sanctions in 2018. In the early 2010s, the proportion of female-headed households remained at 13 percent, but the poverty rate among these families rose from 29 percent to 39 percent. After 2018, this figure increased to 48 percent in 2019 and then to 51 percent in 2020. In other words, for every four new families in poverty, three were headed by women and only one was led by a man.<sup>1</sup>

These statistics already paint a bleak picture, but the reality is likely to be even worse as numbers are probably grossly underreported. That is because, in general, female-headed households are defined as those with a woman as the main breadwinner, even if a man is part of the household. Yet in Iran, if a man is present, those households are not considered female headed and are thus not reported as such.

The second factor was the coronavirus pandemic and the related economic downturn. Between March 2020 and September 2021, over 9,000 households lost [male relatives](#) who were the primary breadwinners, leaving more than [125,000 women and children](#) without a principal earner and without any aid or sufficient state support. As a result, one out of two families in poverty or low-income households was headed by a woman in 2020.

Surveys conducted by the present authors with Iranian women in 2014<sup>2</sup> and 2021<sup>3</sup> indicate that women, as the main caregivers to their families, make extraordinary sacrifices in times of economic need. The women surveyed reported that as the economic situation of their families worsened, they cut back their own spending on leisure items, such as travel, gyms, health spas, and cosmetics. As the situation worsened further, women opted to reduce their own food and nutrition intake to allow their families, especially children, to eat better. Next, women curtailed their families' living standards by reducing the size of their homes, selling their homes in favor of cheaper ones or rentals, and, ultimately, moving to more affordable places.

Most alarmingly, many women who were ill revealed that because of their family's economic situation they had foregone medical treatment for financial reasons. Women who were suffering from chronic and serious illnesses, including cancer, explained in their survey responses that they had opted against some form of therapy given the cost of healthcare and the lack or high price of drugs. They felt that pursuing medical treatment would pose an undue economic burden on their families, from which it would be difficult or impossible to recover. A few women said that they had been forced into unhealthy and violent living conditions, including in relationships with men who had higher incomes. Some LGBTQ individuals noted that they had been forced to resume living with their families, where they suffered violence, and a few women stated that they had engaged in sex work as a result of poverty.

Adding to this, increasing internet shutdowns and restrictions have had a [noticeable impact](#) on a rising number of women entrepreneurs with small and home-based businesses who use social media and messaging applications to promote their goods or services.

## **The Compounding Challenges of Life in Iran's Provinces**

The situation for women, especially from ethnic minorities, in many of Iran's less economically developed provinces, tends to be more fragile and difficult than for those in larger cities. Living in already marginalized places that suffer from inequalities, a lack of investment, and more severe impacts of the economic downturn, women in the provinces have a harder time finding employment. They also face mindsets and higher levels of discrimination that hinder their social and economic participation even further. For example, [Sistan and Baluchestan Province](#) contends with a growing number of female-headed households, and the highest number of households headed by girls under the age of eighteen. At the same

time, the province has to contend with a range of social problems, such as high rates of early and child marriage, unregistered marriages and unregistered children born of these marriages, high rates of poverty, and one of Iran's highest rates of unemployment.

Of the ten provinces with the [highest unemployment rates](#) in 2021, six are located on Iran's border. Because the populations of many border provinces are composed of ethnic and religious minorities that the central government often accuses of separatism, a securitized approach has resulted in a lack of investment and underdevelopment. Moreover, discrimination against minorities exacerbates their employment difficulties. For example, Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces, both home to ethnic Kurds, had [Iran's highest unemployment rates](#) in 2021, at 18.8 percent and 18 percent, respectively—twice the national average. Given the low rate of women's economic participation nationally, with the rate in the provinces only 10.8 percent in 2021, it is fair to say that women in provinces with large ethnic minorities, especially border provinces, face even greater barriers.

## **An Alarming Increase in Child Marriage**

While the legal age of marriage is thirteen for girls and fifteen for boys, Iranians typically marry later: in 2019, the [average age of marriage](#) was twenty-three for women and twenty-seven for men. Yet, in recent years there has been an alarming increase in marriage among girls under fifteen, and even marriage of girls aged nine to twelve can be legal if permitted by a court's decision on a father's request. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, in the Iranian calendar year beginning in March 2020, 31,379 [girls between ten and fourteen](#) were married, indicating a 10.5 percent increase on the previous year.

Most social researchers attribute this trend to [poverty](#). But on top of this, the implementation of state policies that promote women's roles as wives and mothers encourages lower marriage ages, including among children, and larger families for all Iranians. In the long term, increasing numbers of child marriages due to discriminatory legislation and poverty will aggravate the gap between men's and women's labor market participation and severely violate children's human rights.

## **Women's Civil Society Organizations in Iran and the Region**

Iran's women's movement is actively engaged on issues far beyond women's rights and is increasingly influential in a range of other movements, from students and teachers to workers and environmental groups. Yet, as the economic situation has worsened for all Iranians, particularly women, economic concerns have made it difficult to pursue volunteer work. Compounded by heavy repression and the emigration of activists, this trend has serious consequences for Iranian civil society, which, because of the economic crisis, has been forced to move increasingly away from the promotion of rights strategies and toward the support of livelihoods.

In recent years, the targeting of women's groups has increased; under the Raisi presidency it has reached even those engaged in low-key activities. Because of their broader involvement in various movements, women human rights defenders have been increasingly targeted. Along with their male counterparts, they regularly face surveillance, interrogation, detention, and long prison sentences. The crackdown on women human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society activists has heavily limited these actors' ability to mobilize and organize more coherently. In recent protests, [scores of Iranian women human rights defenders](#), like other rights activists, were targeted and arrested in a move that not only limits current protests but also hinders future efforts to push for change.

Despite the burden placed on Iranian civil society and the women's movement in particular, rights activists continue to seek innovative ways to address the needs of Iranians and advocate for equality. Over the last four decades, the Iranian women's movement has been actively engaged in preventing violence, working to reform laws that discriminate against women, increasing women's political participation and representation, and ensuring women's economic well-being and participation. Doing so in times of repression indicates that the desire for change is strong and that those striving for social change are fully committed to improving their societies.

For example, in 2015, women's rights groups conducted broad surveys and interviews to identify the demands of women and offer examples of legislation that would address and prevent [violence against women](#). Another initiative focused on ensuring that women themselves could be in positions to commit to greater rights for women and on [empowering women](#) who were appointed to management positions or elected to the parliament or local councils. As the routes for legislative reforms are increasingly blocked by the various branches of government, the women's movement has sought ways to educate the public about women's rights and gender equality.

In recent years, the women's movement has also engaged with private entities to increase the protection of women's rights at work. Innovative approaches have involved the public, the private sector, and the government in addressing women's demands, including in efforts to prevent gender-based violence in public spaces through [broad-based outreach and awareness raising](#) and in workplaces through [training of employees and employers](#). In the wake of the MeToo movement in Iran, professional associations stepped up publicly against sexual harassment and abuse: a [public letter](#) signed by 800 women decrying sexual violence had an impact on the country's movie industry, and women's initiatives with employers in the tech sector pushed some employers to adopt sexual harassment prevention policies.

Finally, systemic violations of women's and human rights, as well as growing pressures on civil society groups, are of concern across the region, where authoritarianism is on the rise and civic space is shrinking fast. Socioeconomic grievances gravely impact people's lived realities and hinder their agency in calling for the realization of rights and equality. Unlike in Iran, however, civil society groups in most countries in the Middle East and North Africa enjoy connections with their counterparts elsewhere in the region and internationally,



allowing them to learn from one other and be supported. While a language barrier might be a contributing factor, years of international and regional isolation have left Iranian civil society with very limited avenues for peer exchanges and global solidarity. In fact, the Iranian women's movement has much to share with and learn from activists in the region and beyond.

## The EU's Approach to Iranian Women's Economic and Social Rights

Iran's brutal and violent crackdown on protests, civil society, women, and human rights defenders calls for a reaction to the immediate situation in the country and points to a need to provide support and solidarity. Moreover, the legal and informal barriers faced by Iranian women as well as the harsh realities of their situation highlight the necessity to center women's rights and human security in a sustained policy approach toward Iran. Women's rights need to be integrated into an adjusted strategic approach that keeps a medium- and a long-term perspective in mind.

In recent months, while [the EU has been vocal](#) in criticizing the Iranian government's violent repression of citizens, this stance has not transformed into an alignment of political priorities with a focus on fundamental rights. To date, the EU's overemphasis on the nuclear file has led to a rather [narrow policy framework](#). Particularly since Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, the EU has mostly focused on negotiations to revive the agreement. Despite its importance, however, the nuclear deal addresses only a narrow security concern.

When it comes to women's rights in EU foreign policy, [human rights and gender equality](#) are among the union's guiding principles and key values. The 2016 [EU Global Strategy](#) put forth an approach of "principled pragmatism" and pointed out the need to "mainstream human rights and gender issues." The [third Gender Action Plan](#), which covers the period 2021–2025, aims to strengthen gender equality as an integral part of the EU's foreign policy. More specifically, the action plan outlines the strengthening of economic and social rights as well as the empowerment of girls and women as key areas of engagement. The EU's 2014 [Trade for All](#) strategy also referred to human rights as a core principle and mentioned the promotion of human and labor rights as an objective, although the strategy remained entirely gender blind.

Despite these principles, and while equal rights and—to some extent—the role of women and gender equality are mentioned in the EU's policy framework toward Iran, they are [addressed mostly as add-ons](#) instead of political priorities. The framework toward Iran is

based on a [2016 joint statement](#) by the EU foreign policy high representative and the Iranian foreign minister, complemented by several [EU Council conclusions](#). A women's rights and gender perspective is not integrated throughout the framework, nor are women's needs effectively addressed.

Most recently, the EU's 2021–2027 [Multiannual Indicative Program](#) (MIP) on Iran outlines the EU's policy priorities and approach toward the country in the medium to long term. Yet, the program fails to integrate women's rights as a cross-cutting issue or a concrete policy goal. For example, the MIP does not link economic engagement and investment with a women's rights perspective. The document defines “sustainable growth and jobs” as the first of three priorities and mentions the “economic empowerment of youth and women” as an area in which the EU could provide technical assistance. However, none of the objectives or indicators refers to support or empowerment of women as a policy goal, thus failing to mainstream women's rights or provide a robust framework for their realization.

In light of the Iranian authorities' violent repression of protests, the uncertain future of the nuclear negotiations, and legitimate security concerns, business or economic engagement with Iran seems out of the question at present. At the same time, it is important for the EU to acknowledge and address the women's rights blind spots in its strategic approach because of the impact they have on women in Iran. Yet, there has been no noticeable reckoning of how the EU's policies and instruments have discarded a women's rights perspective on Iran.

## **Toward a Broader View of Women's Rights**

Moving forward, the EU should take a more decisive approach toward Iran and develop a response that translates support for the Iranian people—especially those who risk their lives in the streets protesting for freedom and dignity—into a [comprehensive policy change](#). The EU is well positioned to adopt and pursue an expanded approach, which is even more urgent in light of the current situation. This is, first, a question of principle considering that gender equality is a human right in itself. Second, however, centering women's rights in foreign policy is also in the interests of peace, stability, and development. Gender equality is beneficial for all members of society: it is the strongest indicator of a state's [internal and external peacefulness](#), which should be acknowledged as a basis for policy planning and as a sensible political objective. Moreover, gender equality and the realization of women's rights are crucial for a country's [economic and social development](#) and instrumental to the protection and realization of [other fundamental rights](#), such as children's rights, and the rights of other marginalized groups, such as ethnic or religious minorities.

In other words, it is high time to acknowledge that women's rights are not an isolated issue of interest only to certain groups. In a political climate in which the women's and human rights angle is especially politicized and securitized, the EU needs to identify ways to better

support Iranian women's economic and social rights, comprehensively incorporate a gender perspective, and mainstream women's rights into all dimensions of the union's Iran policy. Even discussing the current socioeconomic situation in Iran by acknowledging women's rights would help strengthen the rights of the most marginalized.

## Immediate Priorities Within a Long-Term Policy Shift

Iran's brutal response to legitimate protests calls for a strong signal from the EU. That signal needs to combine actions of immediate importance with an expanded approach that responds to Iranian women's lived realities and the barriers to their socioeconomic equality in the long term. Not least because of Iran's precarious socioeconomic situation, which results from economic mismanagement, massive corruption, and the harsh impacts of a maximum-pressure sanctions regime, a targeted, longer-term, and purposeful approach is essential to ensuring women's empowerment and well-being.

### Immediate Priorities

Taking a stance in light of the current situation means, above all, responding to the massive violations of women's and human rights. These violations include widespread violence against demonstrators; arbitrary arrests of protesters, women's and human rights defenders, civil society activists, and journalists; poor and often deadly prison conditions; systematic sexual and gender-based violence; and gross violations of due process by the judiciary that lead to long prison terms and unjust sentences of execution for peaceful protesters.

Accordingly, the EU should:

- take a strong stand against the execution of peaceful protesters while using all diplomatic and other avenues available to the EU to end such violations;
- communicate clear human rights expectations to the Iranian authorities, in particular with regard to the use of lethal force to repress protests, the situation of detainees, their lack of access to fair trials, and serious violations of due process;
- pay special attention to the hundreds of human rights defenders, journalists, and peaceful dissidents who remain behind bars;

- continue to enforce and expand targeted individual sanctions against those in the Iranian authorities responsible for women’s and human rights violations;
- ensure protesters and human rights defenders at risk can leave the country to safe places;
- support the global and local documentation and verification of rights violations and hold Iranian authorities responsible for violations through targeted restrictive measures;
- uphold digital rights, support efforts to ensure access to reliable virtual private networks and other digital security tools that could allow Iranians to circumvent internet restrictions and censorship, and engage with private sector actors on those efforts;
- respond to the violent crackdown on particularly vulnerable groups, such as Kurds, Balochis, Baha’is, youth, children, and other marginalized communities;
- support and protect women’s and other human rights defenders through means from increased and flexible funding to unbureaucratic visa processes and the possibility to live and work in the EU;
- monitor and minimize the impact of political and economic restrictive measures on the civilian population; and
- engage on creating a multilateral coalition of states that include key Global South countries to communicate clear and concrete human rights demands to Iran and press the Iranian authorities to change their conduct.

### **Longer-Term Support for Women and Human Rights in Iran**

Iranians are showing tremendous courage and resilience in standing up for their rights. The challenges of growing a leaderless protest movement in the face of brutal repression, however, remain significant. Among the foreseeable scenarios for Iran’s medium-term future, the EU should seriously consider a period in which repression continues to increase and the basic functions of government deteriorate. In this scenario, although meaningful diplomatic engagement or even close cooperation with Iran seems unlikely, diplomatic leverage remains one of the few key tools with which the EU can lead on supporting the struggle of the Iranian people.

The EU should strategically prepare a comprehensive approach that encompasses human security and the promotion of human and women's rights along three lines: recentering women's and human rights, taking lived realities into account, and adjusting the EU's approach to include all actors and perspectives.

### Recentering Women's and Human Rights

The EU should place international human and women's rights at the heart of any political or economic policy toward Iran. This can be put into practice with the following steps, even in the difficult Iranian context.

#### **Uphold global norms to establish political accountability at the international level:**

Concretely, this means not only supporting international mechanisms such as the United Nations (UN) fact-finding mission created to provide accountability for abuses but also continuing to push for the ratification of CEDAW, of which Iran is one of only three nonratifying countries. Also, EU members should press Iran to ratify the 2019 ILO Violence and Harassment Convention while swiftly signing and ratifying the convention themselves. In addition, the EU should remind Iran to realize women's rights in relation to other human rights treaties, such as the ICESCR, including by signing and ratifying the 2008 optional protocol to this covenant, and the ICCPR.

**Understand women's rights as a cross-cutting issue:** Acknowledging that women's rights include the interconnectedness between civil and political rights, on the one hand, and social and economic rights, on the other, is a prerequisite to overcoming the singling out of women's rights as a topic of individual interest to some, which often leads to them being deprioritized. This step also requires the EU to critically reflect on the extent to which it mainstreams women's rights as a central element of the union's strategy, policy, and program planning on Iran.

### Taking Lived Realities Into Account

The absence of an EU delegation in Iran makes it challenging to gain comprehensive, well-informed, and nuanced perspectives from within the country. However, the EU should try to bridge this information gap and align its programming and policies with the needs of women and other marginalized groups. It should do so on the following four levels.

**Support individual women in their needs:** Support measures could include humanitarian relief, especially considering the hardships facing women and the socioeconomic effects of the coronavirus pandemic on women and female-headed households. Such relief could include livelihood support and medical assistance, particularly in areas with ethnic minorities, given that these regions tend to be underdeveloped and suffer from greater economic

difficulties. At the programmatic level, if closer economic engagement becomes possible in the medium to long term, economic support could include concrete measures, such as protection from harassment or professional training programs. For any such measures, independent Iranian civil society should be engaged, and men should be involved as the addressees of training and programming.

**Promote women’s agency:** In addition to providing support where needed, the EU should make use of women’s actual economic agency. This should entail assistance to female entrepreneurs and members of female-headed cooperatives, for example through specific training programs in increasingly marketable sectors. The EU should also explore individual fellowship opportunities for participants to conduct small-scale research or receive practical training. If and when economic investment is feasible, the EU should prioritize Iran’s provinces, especially those where the economy is weak. Likewise, ensuring that EU businesses or partnerships hire locally in provincial areas and providing community investment and social responsibility schemes are further ways for the EU to play a supportive role.

**Support and strengthen women’s rights organizations:** The EU should explore options to provide training, platforms for exchange, and, where possible, funding for women’s rights organizations. The union should enable communication mechanisms and civil society input into all elements of EU policymaking on Iran, as doing so would offer unique opportunities to narrow the existing information gap. With regard to funding, the MIP and the programs for human rights and democracy and for civil society organizations under the [Global Europe: Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument](#) would, in theory, allow for the allocation of further funds.

**Address and remedy the impact of sanctions:** It is important to continue to identify and sanction individual Iranian government officials who have perpetrated serious abuses. However, an approach that accounts for Iranian women’s lived realities would require the EU to undertake an honest reckoning of the consequences of the international sectoral sanctions regime, especially on women and other vulnerable groups. Although the EU lifted its own nuclear-related restrictive measures in 2016, it has failed in its attempt to provide for continued trade after the United States reimposed sanctions in 2018. At the very least, the EU should develop a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the impact of such measures, as they tend to have negative gendered effects and disproportionately harm vulnerable groups in society. On this basis, the EU should consider adopting policies to actively mitigate and redress the impact of sanctions on these groups.

### Adjusting the EU’s Strategic Approach

Finally, the EU should adapt its approach to Iran by including all actors and perspectives with a view to empowering society to shape change. This is an important medium-term step toward preserving actors’ capacity and emboldening them to support the protection of human rights in Iran.

**Work with international organizations:** One way to maneuver through Iran’s specifically challenging environment is to explore the potential for principled cooperation with international actors and UN agencies, provided they can articulate clear human rights demands and benchmarks. The ILO, for example, already works in Iran on [training programs](#), women’s economic empowerment, and efforts to provide [digital and information technology infrastructure](#). Joining forces with such bodies could not only produce synergies but also enable greater scope of action in a repressive political context. Nevertheless, any effort to support civil society should aim to incorporate the demands of women human rights defenders and activists on the ground, so that the support can be both appropriate and safe.

**Prepare and engage the European private sector:** In light of current developments, private sector engagement is certainly not imminent, nor should it be considered if the violent repression of peaceful protesters continues. Yet, the private sector, particularly the tech industry, can be viewed as an untapped asset to create solutions and resources to support civil society and independent actors. This is especially important considering the serious strides made by Iranian officials to cut off Iranians from the internet and transform the parts of the network that are still accessible into a national intranet.

A comprehensive approach to supporting women’s economic and social rights would require private sector engagement, and the EU could strategically prepare a women’s rights–based engagement strategy that centers on human rights. In the medium to long term, the EU should explore whether it would be possible and safe to establish collaboration mechanisms between private sector actors and civil society organizations. This collaboration could focus on protection, safety, and nondiscrimination programming as well as empowerment, capacity building, and professional training for women and marginalized individuals.

If and when the EU seeks to increase business ties with Iran, the union should prepare accountability mechanisms for European companies willing to reengage in Iran. Such mechanisms should be based on transparency and reporting to ensure a strong link between a political approach that centers on women’s rights and private sector activities in support of these priorities. This approach would strengthen the positive role the private sector can play in the realization of women’s rights. Additionally, it would hold companies and investors accountable to provide internationally recognized labor standards, offer equal participation to women in the workforce, and act against discrimination, harassment, and sexual and gender-based violence.

**Regionalize the EU’s perspective:** The EU should take a more regional perspective on Iran and evaluate the challenges and opportunities that come with such a perspective. The union could take an active role in promoting regional cooperation among feminist movements and on women’s empowerment issues by creating space and indirectly supporting locally led initiatives. Such an approach may also yield results in terms of protective legal measures for women, as this is an issue with which most countries in the Middle East and North Africa contend.

In terms of addressing and mainstreaming women's rights in economic, trade, and investment policies, the EU should evaluate its approach and practices toward other countries in the region. This could offer valuable best practices. At the same time, this step would likely require the EU to redouble its efforts to center women's rights as a cross-cutting issue in the union's interactions with other countries in the region.

The urgency of the women's and human rights crisis in Iran and the perseverance of Iranian women—in spite of repression, crackdowns, and deadly violence—demand that the EU do everything possible to support them. Women's rights are a crucial indicator of peace, development, and democracy, and the case of Iran highlights once more that if women are not safe, nobody is safe.



## About the Authors

**Barbara Mittelhammer** is an independent political analyst and consultant. Her research focuses on human security, gender in peace and security, feminist foreign policy, and the role of civil society in foreign policy making.

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## Notes

- 1 Forthcoming publication by Miaan Group and Femena.
- 2 In 2014, female activists conducted surveys with one hundred women in three middle-class areas of Tehran to examine the impacts of sanctions and the worsening economic situation on the lives of middle-class Iranian women. These surveys included twenty-five in-depth interviews with women in these neighborhoods. The survey results were not published but informed subsequent articles on the economic situation of Iranian women.
- 3 Short surveys were conducted with over one hundred men and women in several areas, including the outskirts of Tehran, and the provinces of Azerbaijan, Kermanshah and Sistan and Baluchestan to assess how the worsening economic situation was impacting middle-class Iranians. This survey was conducted for a forthcoming publication by Miaan Group and Femena.



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