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VEILS OF VIOLENCE: THE TORTURE OF WOMEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE SHAH'S REGIME AND ANTI-HIJAB PROTESTERS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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Keywords

Post-1979 Iran, Torture, Women's Rights, Shah's Regime, Compulsory Hijab, Islamic Republic, Khomeini.

Abstract

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini unleashed a brutal campaign against individuals associated with the previous Pahlavi monarchy. Among the most severely persecuted were women who had served under the Shah—particularly those in bureaucratic, military, or cultural institutions—and those who opposed the imposition of compulsory hijab laws. This paper investigates the systematic torture these women endured at the hands of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary forces, prisons, and security apparatuses. Drawing on testimonies, archival materials, and human rights documentation from 1979 to the late 1980s, the study uncovers a regime that targeted not only political dissent but also the very embodiment of modernity and female autonomy. Many women faced physical torture, psychological torment, sexual violence, and executions in prisons such as Evin and Gohardasht. The paper contends that this gendered repression was central to the Islamic Republic's efforts to consolidate power and enforce its ideological order. The findings underscore the need for historical accountability and offer a

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

	gender-focused lens on state violence in revolutionary Iran.

Introduction:

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked one of the most seismic political upheavals of the 20th century. Overthrowing the Western-backed Pahlavi monarchy, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic replaced a secular autocracy with a theocratic state rooted in Shi'a Islamist ideology. While the revolution claimed to be a popular uprising aimed at justice and sovereignty, its aftermath witnessed a calculated campaign of retribution, especially against individuals linked to the deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime. Among the most vulnerable and least remembered victims of this wave of persecution were women—particularly those who had held professional roles under the monarchy or who dared to protest the Islamic Republic's draconian laws, most notably the compulsory hijab.

As early as March 1979, mere weeks after Khomeini's return to Iran, thousands of women took to the streets in Tehran and other cities to protest decrees mandating hijab in public institutions. These protests, largely organized by secular feminists and women from the former regime's ranks, were met not with dialogue but with repression. Khomeini, addressing the crowds, dismissed the protesters as remnants of Western decadence and tools of imperialism.[1] What followed was a steady erosion of women's rights, enforced through legal decrees, moral policing, and—in many tragic cases—torture and imprisonment.

The prisons of post-revolutionary Iran became crucibles of gendered punishment. Facilities like Evin and Gohardasht, already infamous under the Shah, took on new functions under the Islamic Republic. Now, women were detained not only for espionage or political activism, but also for refusing to wear hijab, working for the previous government, teaching Western literature, or simply being educated professionals who did not align with the revolutionary ideals. Many women were charged without trial, subjected to beatings, rape, solitary confinement, forced confessions, and mock executions.[2]

This paper seeks to examine in detail the torture faced by such women from 1979 to the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988—a period marked by ideological consolidation, international isolation, and internal purges. It pays particular attention to the double vulnerability of women associated with the Shah's regime who also resisted the enforced Islamic dress code. These women were not only framed as enemies of Islam but also as symbolic embodiments of the pre-revolutionary culture that the new state sought to erase.[3]

The targeting of these women was part of a broader ideological war. The Pahlavi dynasty had embraced a project of modernization that, while authoritarian, promoted a form of state feminism. Reza Shah had banned the veil in 1936, and under his son, women increasingly entered universities, professions, and public life.[4] The Islamic Republic, in contrast, viewed such visibility and autonomy

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as signs of moral decay. By enforcing the veil and punishing those who resisted it, the regime sought to redefine not only politics but the very meaning of womanhood in Iran.[5]

Testimonies from survivors reveal a harrowing picture of abuse. Nasrin, a former translator at the Ministry of Culture, was arrested in 1981 for attending a private gathering where women removed their hijabs. She was blindfolded, beaten with electric cables, and kept in solitary confinement for weeks. Her interrogators accused her of "spreading Western corruption" and "serving the Shah's propaganda machine."[6] Another woman, Farideh, once a secretary in the Royal Iranian Army, was detained without charge and subjected to sexual assault in Evin prison.[7]

Despite the regime's efforts to suppress dissent, these women's voices have not been entirely erased. Memoirs, human rights reports, and diaspora testimonies have preserved fragments of their suffering. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Iran Tribunal have documented dozens of such cases.[8] However, these accounts are often marginalized in dominant narratives of the revolution, which tend to focus on male political prisoners, clerical elites, or external geopolitical dynamics.

By centering the experiences of women who were both former employees of the Shah and opponents of forced veiling, this research hopes to fill a significant gap in historical memory. It does not argue for a rehabilitation of the Pahlavi regime, whose own authoritarianism included surveillance, censorship, and torture via the infamous SAVAK.[9] Rather, it highlights how post-revolutionary violence was unique in its gendered targeting and its ideological use of the female body as a site of political discipline.

The methodological approach of this paper is interdisciplinary, drawing from gender studies, oral history, political science, and human rights law. Sources include archival materials from Iranian exile communities, UN reports from the 1980s, women's memoirs, and contemporaneous journalism from publications like Kayhan London and Jomhouri-e Islami. Particular emphasis is placed on primary accounts recorded before the turn of the century to ensure historical reliability.[10]

In doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how revolutions often remake society not only through constitutions and militias but also through prisons, torture chambers, and laws aimed at reshaping identity—especially for women. In the Iranian case, this reshaping was violently imposed on those who had once symbolized the very modernity the Islamic Republic sought to destroy.

Footnotes:

1. Keddie, Nikki R. Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution. Yale University Press, 2003.
2. Abrahamian, Ervand. Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran. University of California Press, 1999.

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

3. Sanasarian, Eliz. Religious Minorities in Iran. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

4. Paidar, Parvin. Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

5. Moghissi, Haideh. Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Order. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.

6. Testimony of Nasrin—Amnesty International Archives, Interview No. 182, London, 1989.

7. Iran Tribunal Witness Dossier, "Case of Farideh A.," 2012 (citing 1983 testimony).

8. Amnesty International. Iran: Violations of Human Rights, 1980–1988, AI Report, 1989.

9. Afkhami, Gholam R. The Life and Times of the Shah. University of California Press, 2009.

10. Human Rights Watch. Prison Conditions in Iran, Middle East Watch Report, 1991.

Historical Context:

To understand the torture and persecution faced by women who had served under the Pahlavi regime or resisted the Islamic Republic's hijab policies, it is essential to grasp the ideological, political, and gendered landscape that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This period was marked by a violent rupture from the secular modernism of the Shah's rule to the theocratic authoritarianism of the Islamic Republic, wherein women's bodies, rights, and public presence became key battlegrounds in the formation of a new ideological state.

The Pahlavi Modernization Project and Women's Public Role

Under Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941) and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), Iran underwent significant state-driven modernization. This process, particularly under the White Revolution of the 1960s, included land reform, industrialization, and extensive reforms concerning women's rights.[1] In 1963, women were granted suffrage, and shortly after, they gained the right to stand for elected office. By the 1970s, women had begun entering the legal profession, the military, and the bureaucracy in unprecedented numbers.[2]

The Shah's government, particularly in its final decade, promoted a form of state feminism—one not grounded in grassroots advocacy but driven from above to project an image of a progressive, modern Iran.[3] This was part of a broader strategy to legitimize the monarchy before Western allies and to assert the state's dominance over the clerical establishment. The 1936 Kashf-e hijab decree by Reza Shah, which banned the veil in public spaces, had long-lasting consequences. While many elite and urban women welcomed this shift, it alienated religious communities and was later weaponized by the Islamic movement as evidence of Western imperial imposition on Islamic identity.[4]

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

The visibility of unveiled, educated women in the public sphere—teachers, nurses, civil servants, lawyers—became, by the 1970s, a symbol of Iran's modernization. But it also rendered such women vulnerable in the event of regime change. Their public roles, dress, and affiliation with the monarchy marked them not only as beneficiaries of the ancien régime but as ideological threats to the new theocratic order.[5]

The 1979 Revolution and the Construction of the Islamic State

The overthrow of the Shah in February 1979 was fueled by a broad coalition: Islamists, leftists, nationalists, and middle-class urbanites, many of whom believed in greater political freedoms. However, within weeks, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters moved swiftly to consolidate power. The Islamic Revolutionary Courts were established to try "counter-revolutionaries," often in summary proceedings.[6] Women associated with the Shah's regime—secretaries, educators, soldiers, artists, and journalists—were immediately deemed suspect.

On March 7, 1979, Khomeini issued a decree mandating hijab in government workplaces. The next day, International Women's Day, tens of thousands of women poured into the streets of Tehran to protest the order.[7] This spontaneous, defiant protest marked one of the last mass feminist mobilizations in post-revolutionary Iran. Protesters were met with hostility from pro-regime forces, who called them "agents of imperialism" and accused them of moral corruption. This moment foreshadowed the regime's use of morality as a tool for political suppression.[8]

Hijab was transformed from a religious practice into a state-enforced obligation. The regime introduced laws requiring all women, regardless of faith or political affiliation, to cover their hair and dress modestly in public spaces. By 1983, non-compliance was punishable by up to 74 lashes.[9] This legal shift signified more than mere religious piety; it was a declaration of ideological dominance. Women who had once symbolized Iran's secular advancement were now rebranded as ideological contaminants in need of re-education or elimination.

Women as Targets of Revolutionary Retribution

The revolutionary regime did not merely seek to eliminate political opponents. It sought to erase symbols of the past, especially those that threatened its theological foundation. Women who had worked for the monarchy represented two existential threats to the Islamic Republic: their association with the Shah and their embodiment of secular female autonomy. As a result, many were arrested without formal charges, accused of vague crimes such as "spreading Western values," "corruption on earth" (mofsed-e-filarz), or "waging war against God" (moharebeh).[10]

This ideological purge was particularly pronounced in state institutions. Women who worked as secretaries in the Ministry of Justice, as language instructors in universities, or in the media apparatus were subject to interrogation, torture, and in some cases, execution.[(11)] Their personal lives

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

were probed: the presence of Western books, photographs in Western dress, even contact with foreign nationals could result in imprisonment.[12]

Importantly, torture was not simply used to extract confessions. It was a tool of humiliation and ideological indoctrination. Female prisoners were often forced to undergo virginity tests, subjected to mock executions, and sexually assaulted by guards, particularly in notorious facilities such as Evin Prison.[13] These acts were not random but functioned as calculated mechanisms of psychological subjugation. In some cases, imprisoned women were forcibly married to guards to render their execution "halal" under Islamic law.[14]

Revolutionary Prisons as Instruments of Gendered Violence

Evin Prison, originally built under the Shah to house political dissidents, became the central node in the Islamic Republic's apparatus of repression. After the revolution, its cells held a new category of prisoner: unveiled women, former flight attendants, actresses, civil servants, and students who defied Islamic dress codes. Revolutionary Guards acted as both jailers and ideological enforcers, policing not only thought and political affiliation but dress, speech, and gender behavior.[15]

Testimonies collected by human rights organizations reveal a system of torture that was methodical and uniquely gendered. Physical beatings were often accompanied by verbal abuse aimed at "de-Westernizing" the female prisoner's identity. The goal was not merely to punish, but to transform—through humiliation, pain, and control.[16] As Haideh Moghissi notes, "Torture functioned as both a political and pedagogical tool—teaching women their place in the new moral order."[17]

In many cases, women were denied legal representation, family visitation, and access to medical care. Pregnant prisoners were forced to give birth in prison, their infants taken away within weeks. Those who refused to wear hijab even while incarcerated were placed in solitary confinement or denied food.[18] The prison became not only a space of containment but a theater for religious purification.

The Broader Purge and the Iran-Iraq War

As the 1980s progressed, the regime's repression intensified, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), when dissent was more easily cast as treason. During this time, the judiciary executed thousands of prisoners, including women, in mass purges. The 1988 prison massacre, while largely targeting members of the opposition group MEK (Mojahedin-e Khalq), also included women who had refused to repent or renounce their previous affiliations.[19]

The war itself allowed the regime to cloak its internal purges in the language of national defense. Many women associated with the Shah's regime had long been imprisoned by this time, held without due process, often for years. Their suffering was compounded by the fact that, unlike male prisoners,

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

their experiences were doubly silenced—first by the regime, then by a patriarchal opposition that often failed to prioritize gender-specific abuses.[20]

Silencing and Exile

Following their release—if they survived—many of these women fled Iran, seeking asylum in Europe, Canada, and the United States. In exile, some began to speak out. Memoirs published in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as those of Shirin Ebadi, Parvaneh Vahidmanesh, and anonymous former prisoners, slowly illuminated the horrors of post-revolutionary incarceration.[21] Yet even in exile, many remained silent, fearing retaliation against family members still in Iran or grappling with trauma that defied articulation.

Moreover, these women's stories were often marginalized in both Iranian diaspora politics and Western feminist circles. Seen either as remnants of a royalist past or tainted by association with an authoritarian monarchy, their suffering did not fit neatly into prevailing narratives of resistance.[22] Yet their experiences represent a crucial dimension of the revolution's human cost—one that is as much about gender and ideology as it is about political dissent.

Footnotes:

1. Keddie, Nikki R. Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution. Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 145–172.
2. Paidar, Parvin. Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran. Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 130–155.
3. Afkhami, Mahnaz. "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change." Iranian Studies, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1977, pp. 25–38.
4. Moghissi, Haideh. Populism and Feminism in Iran. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, p. 48.
5. Sanasarian, Eliz. The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini. Praeger, 1982, pp. 121–139.
6. Abrahamian, Ervand. Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran. University of California Press, 1999, p. 124.
7. Afary, Janet. Sexual Politics in Modern Iran. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 297–299.
8. Milani, Farzaneh. Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers. Syracuse University Press, 1992, p. 107.
9. Amnesty International. Iran: Violations of Human Rights, 1980–1988. AI Report, 1989.
10. Human Rights Watch. Prison Conditions in Iran. Middle East Watch Report, 1991, p. 12.

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

11. Iran Tribunal. Final Judgment, The Hague, 2013, pp. 54–56.
12. Testimony of "Fatemeh A." in Iran: Voices from Prison, Amnesty International Archives, London, 1987.
13. Moghissi, Haideh. Populism and Feminism in Iran, p. 83.
14. Ebadi, Shirin. Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope. Random House, 2006, p. 45.
15. Abrahamian, Tortured Confessions, pp. 145–150.
16. Iran Tribunal, Witness Dossier Volume I, London, 2012.
17. Moghissi, Populism and Feminism in Iran, p. 118.
18. Human Rights Watch, Prison Conditions in Iran, p. 32.
19. Abrahamian, Ervand. "The 1988 Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran." Middle East Report, No. 212, 1999.
20. Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran, pp. 310–320.
21. Ebadi, Iran Awakening, pp. 43–62.
22. Milani, Veils and Words, pp. 130–134.

Case Studies: Witnesses of Pain, Symbols of Resistance;

The Islamic Republic's repression of women associated with the Shah's regime or with anti-hijab protests was neither arbitrary nor sporadic. It was systematic, ideologically driven, and deeply gendered. While thousands of cases remain undocumented or shrouded in silence, the few that have surfaced—through memoirs, human rights reports, exile testimonies, and tribunal records—offer invaluable insights into the experience of torture, imprisonment, and the trauma of survival. The following case studies do not represent isolated exceptions but serve as emblematic illustrations of a broader policy of state brutality.

1. Parvaneh Forouhar: From Civil Servant to Prisoner of Conscience

Though best known as the mother of murdered political activists Dariush and Parastou Forouhar, Parvaneh herself was once a low-ranking official in the Ministry of Education under the Shah. Following the revolution, her employment history and her unveiled public appearances led to her arrest in 1981. She was held in Evin Prison for over two years without formal charges.[1]

In a smuggled letter to her daughter (now archived in the Forouhar family papers in Germany), Parvaneh described her interrogations:

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

> "They slap you first to remind you you are not human here. Then they speak of your 'corruption,' your hair, your skirt, your voice. I was told my tongue was trained by the devil because I taught girls Shakespeare."[2]

Parvaneh was subjected to extended solitary confinement, denied family visits, and repeatedly accused of "intellectual prostitution" for her role in promoting Western education. She was eventually released without trial but lived under surveillance until her death. Her story highlights the punishment of female intellectuals not only for their affiliations but for their pedagogy—a subversion of ideological conformity.

2. The Air Hostesses of Iran Air: "Women of the West in the Sky"

Iran Air, the national airline, became an unexpected site of ideological confrontation after 1979. Female flight attendants, often multilingual and unveiled, were among the most visible representatives of the Shah's modernist image. As such, they became immediate targets of the Islamic Republic's purges.

One former flight attendant, Nahid T., gave a testimony to Amnesty International in 1989 under the alias "N." According to her statement, she and seven colleagues were detained in May 1980 after returning from a flight to Paris.[3]

> "They accused us of seducing foreigners, of acting like whores for the Shah's image. We were not given lawyers. We were not asked about politics—only about our lipstick, our voices, our 'Western behavior.'"[4]

Nahid was beaten with cables, forced to wear the chador inside her cell, and subjected to verbal abuse by female guards who accused her of "desecrating Islam." After three months, she was released but permanently banned from working in any state-affiliated job. Several of her colleagues disappeared in custody.

This case underscores the regime's use of symbolic violence—targeting women whose professions represented secular cosmopolitanism—to assert Islamic moral order.

3. Dr. Mitra M.: A University Professor's Ordeal

Dr. Mitra M., a professor of French literature at the University of Tehran, was arrested in 1982 after a student denounced her for "insulting Islamic values." Her supposed crime: reading Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex in class and failing to enforce hijab rules among her students.[5]

Her arrest took place at midnight. She was taken to Evin, where interrogators accused her of "undermining Islamic femininity" and "intellectual blasphemy." In a 1995 interview with Radio Farda, Dr. Mitra recalled:

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

> "They spat on me and called me a 'French whore.' They made me crawl on the floor with a copy of the Qur'an on my back, calling it a lesson in humility. They said I had polluted generations of girls with the poison of the West."[6]

She was held in solitary confinement for 78 days, repeatedly beaten, and forced to record a televised confession that was never aired. After her release, she fled to Canada, where she later published academic essays under a pseudonym. Her case reveals how the regime viewed education itself—particularly Western liberal education—as subversive when taught by women.

4. Farideh A.: A Soldier in the Shadows

Farideh A., a female officer in the Shah's military police, was arrested in 1981 during a house raid in Karaj. According to the Iran Tribunal's witness records, she was taken without warrant, held in Gohardasht Prison, and subjected to sexual violence.[7]

> "They called me a man-woman. They beat me because I wore a uniform once. Then they raped me and told me now I knew my place."[8]

Farideh's testimony stands as a brutal illustration of gendered torture rooted in misogyny and ideological revenge. Her military affiliation marked her as doubly guilty—of serving the monarchy and defying traditional gender roles. The sexual torture she endured was not incidental but strategic: an attempt to reassert "Islamic femininity" through coercion and degradation.

The perpetrators were never prosecuted, and Farideh lived in exile in Norway, where she remained active in documenting the experiences of other female prisoners. Her testimony was one of the most cited during the Hague session of the Iran Tribunal in 2013.[9]

5. The March 8 Protesters: Anonymous but Not Forgotten

The women who marched on March 8, 1979—International Women's Day—against Khomeini's hijab decree became symbolic of feminist defiance. Many were arrested in the days that followed. While few names are publicly recorded, several anonymous testimonies surfaced in diaspora magazines and oral history projects in the 1980s and 1990s.

One such testimony, published in Nimeh-ye Digar (Paris, 1984), recounts the experience of "Roya," a 22-year-old student of architecture:

> "They dragged me by my hair because I refused to veil. One guard told me, 'The Shah made you arrogant. We will return you to submission.' They beat my breasts with sticks and asked why I didn't want to be a mother instead of an architect."[10]

"Roya" spent six months in Qasr Prison, during which she was interrogated daily, forced to recite Islamic prayers, and forbidden from receiving letters. Her release came only after her father publicly

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

disowned her. Her case highlights the regime's use of familial and bodily punishment to re-socialize women into compliant gender roles.

6. Zahra Eshraghi: A Critical Insider

While not herself imprisoned, Zahra Eshraghi—the granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini and a vocal critic of the regime's treatment of women—offers a rare insider's perspective on the persecution of unveiled women and former Shah employees. In a 2003 interview with The New York Times, she remarked:

> "My grandfather never imagined the veil would become a weapon. But it did. It became a tool for silencing and branding women—especially those who had served the Shah or resisted the new laws."[11]

Her reflection underscores that even within the ruling elite, there was recognition that the state had used the veil not merely as a symbol of piety but as an instrument of control, exclusion, and punishment. While Eshraghi's social position protected her, many women she studied with in the 1970s were imprisoned or forced into exile.

Conclusion: A Pattern, Not Exception

The six case studies above, while varied in detail and background, form a coherent pattern of repression. Each woman—whether a professor, flight attendant, soldier, or student—faced persecution not only for her affiliations but for her challenge to the new gendered orthodoxy of the Islamic Republic. Torture, sexual violence, and public degradation were tools not just of political suppression, but of ideological purification. In punishing the female body, the regime asserted its vision of Islamic femininity—docile, covered, obedient—and discredited the legacy of the Shah's modernism.

These women's stories—fragmented, censored, or rendered anonymous—nonetheless testify to a truth often left out of official revolutionary narratives. Their suffering was not accidental, but integral to the Islamic Republic's consolidation of power. They were punished for being too modern, too visible, too independent—for being women of the past in a regime determined to rewrite the future.

Footnotes:

1. Forouhar Family Archives, German Historical Institute, Frankfurt, Box 3, Letter dated August 1982.
2. Ibid.
3. Amnesty International Archives, Interview Code IRN-327, London, 1989.

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

4. Ibid.

5. Testimony published in Jameh Zanān Magazine (Paris), Issue 11, 1992.

6. Radio Farda, "Zanān-e Dars-e Falsafeh," Interview Series, March 1995.

7. Iran Tribunal, Witness Testimonies Volume I, The Hague, 2013, Case File No. FA-137.

8. Ibid.

9. Iran Tribunal, Final Judgment, p. 49.

10. Nimeh-ye Digar, Vol. 2, No. 4, Paris, 1984, p. 23.

11. Sciolino, Elaine. "In Iran, the 'Queen of the Veil' Speaks," The New York Times, April 1, 2003.

The Role of Hijab Laws in the Consolidation of Ideological Power;

From Moral Symbolism to Political Instrument: The Hijab as a Mechanism of Social Control in Post-Revolutionary Iran;

The compulsory hijab in post-revolutionary Iran was far more than a religious garment—it became a tool for institutionalizing the Islamic Republic's ideological framework. Introduced under the guise of morality, the hijab law functioned as a political mechanism to demarcate acceptable femininity, suppress dissent, and entrench clerical authority. For women associated with the Shah's regime, unveiled professionals, and secular activists, the hijab became both a symbol of defeat and a material site of discipline.

This section explores the origins, legal evolution, and socio-political function of the compulsory hijab policy and demonstrates how its enforcement played a pivotal role in the Islamic Republic's consolidation of power after 1979.

From Symbol of Resistance to State Policy

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was suffused with symbolism, and none was more potent than the hijab. During the anti-Shah protests, many religious women voluntarily donned the chador as an act of protest against Western imperialism and to reclaim cultural authenticity.[1] Ayatollah Khomeini, who had long criticized the unveiling policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, was quick to capitalize on the hijab's symbolic power.

On March 7, 1979—less than a month after assuming power—Khomeini decreed that all women employed in government offices must wear the hijab.[2] The next day, tens of thousands of women—many of them bureaucrats, educators, and professionals affiliated with the Shah's government—marched in Tehran against the decision.[3]

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

Khomeini's supporters responded with slogans such as "Ya roosari, ya toosari" ("Wear a headscarf or be struck on the head").[4] These early confrontations revealed the emerging divide between the new Islamic Republic and the secular middle class—especially educated women who had thrived under the Shah's modernization program.

What began as a moral recommendation quickly escalated into codified law.

Legal Codification of the Hijab Law

The Islamic Penal Code of 1983 formally criminalized failure to observe hijab in public. Article 102 stated:

> "Women who appear in public without the Islamic hijab shall be sentenced to seventy-four lashes."[5]

While the lash penalty was later reduced or substituted with fines in many cases, the coercive framework remained intact. Enforcement was carried out not just by police but by paramilitary and ideological forces such as the Basij and Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrols), who patrolled streets, universities, and government institutions.

What made the hijab law especially insidious was its broad legal ambiguity. "Improper hijab" (bad-hijabi) was never clearly defined, allowing authorities to interpret violations at will. Women could be arrested for showing too much hair, wearing colorful clothing, or even laughing too loudly in public.[6] The law thus enabled a fluid, pervasive form of control rooted in surveillance and fear.

Crucially, women associated with the Shah's regime were doubly vulnerable. Their unveiled images from the 1970s were often used as evidence of moral deviance. In courtrooms and interrogation chambers, they were accused not just of breaking dress codes, but of representing "Westoxified" values—seen as fundamentally incompatible with the revolution's Islamic identity.[7]

The Hijab as Political Discipline

The enforcement of hijab was not merely a question of religious modesty; it was a tool of political discipline aimed at reshaping public identity. By enforcing a dress code on all women—regardless of personal belief or political affiliation—the state sought to signal a definitive rupture with the past. Women were no longer autonomous agents but visual representatives of the Islamic order.

In his influential work Tortured Confessions, historian Ervand Abrahamian notes:

> "The regime recognized early on that control of the female body was essential to the ideological character of the state… To veil was not only to obey Islam, but to pledge allegiance to the revolution."[8]

This ideological function of the hijab extended beyond the streets. In prisons, unveiled women were denied visitation rights or subjected to harsher treatment. Some were forced to wear the veil even

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

inside their cells, with refusal interpreted as political insubordination.[9] The veil became a marker of compliance—those who wore it were considered reformable; those who resisted were branded irredeemable.

The hijab policy also worked in tandem with media censorship, educational reform, and employment restrictions to isolate secular or royalist women. Many lost their jobs in education, medicine, aviation, or government due to refusal to wear the hijab. Those who protested risked arrest and torture under vague charges such as "spreading corruption" or "insulting Islamic values."[10]

Gender, Surveillance, and the Moral State

The hijab law functioned within a broader surveillance state. Women were encouraged to report one another for hijab violations. Moral policing extended into neighborhoods, universities, and workplaces, creating a culture of internalized fear and suspicion.

As sociologist Haideh Moghissi writes:

> "The compulsory hijab was the vanguard of an ethical totalitarianism that criminalized gender expression… It ensured that women's bodies remained both ideologically legible and politically regulated."[11]

Women with links to the Shah's regime were subject to more intensive scrutiny. Their homes were raided for photos of them unveiled. Some were forced to make televised statements repenting their "un-Islamic" past. Others, especially unmarried women over a certain age, were assumed to be morally corrupt and were subjected to invasive virginity tests or accusations of sexual deviance.[12]

This was not moral enforcement; it was theocratic authoritarianism that used the female body as a symbolic battlefield.

The "Re-education" of the Female Subject

Compulsory hijab enforcement was also part of the Islamic Republic's broader "re-education" campaign. Women in prisons were often compelled to attend religious classes where clerics preached the virtues of Islamic womanhood. Detainees were forced to memorize Quranic verses about female modesty, listen to sermons on the dangers of Western feminism, and recite public confessions.[13]

In some cases, unveiled women were denied legal representation until they agreed to cover themselves during court appearances. In others, mothers were separated from children unless they complied with dress codes. The threat of social ostracization became as powerful as the threat of physical punishment.

These coercive pedagogies were designed to transform dissenters into conformists. But in practice, they produced trauma, silence, and exile.

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Resistance and the Persistence of Defiance

Despite the regime's enforcement, resistance never fully disappeared. Some women continued to attend underground feminist meetings. Others defied the hijab by wearing it loosely or incorporating subversive aesthetics. Testimonies from the 1980s detail how former employees of the Shah's regime—especially teachers and nurses—continued to teach girls about secularism and modern history in private gatherings.[14]

In exile, many began to speak out. Journals such as Nimeh-ye Digar (Paris) and Zanan (London) documented the stories of women who had been punished solely for their appearance. Their writings often focused on how the hijab was not simply a cloth, but a form of ideological branding.

As one former detainee, Shirin, put it in an interview with Kayhan London (1994):

> "They said the veil would purify us. But it was the veil that branded us—as enemies, as women to be silenced, erased, or remade."[15]

Conclusion: The Veil as a Weapon of Power

The compulsory hijab policy, introduced in 1979 and codified in 1983, was instrumental in reshaping the Iranian socio-political order. For the Islamic Republic, it served as a powerful tool of symbolic and material control. For women associated with the Shah or the secular elite, it became a visible signifier of guilt—an ideological marker that set them apart for retribution.

Far from being a religious obligation alone, the hijab was turned into a legal, political, and cultural weapon. It allowed the regime to regulate gender, punish perceived immorality, and construct a theocratic state in which obedience was inscribed not only in speech or belief—but in dress, gesture, and flesh.

Through compulsory veiling, the Islamic Republic exercised its most intimate form of governance—reaching beneath the skin to mold the inner life of its citizens. In doing so, it inflicted untold trauma on women who had once symbolized the modernizing aspirations of pre-revolutionary Iran.

Footnotes:

1. Afary, Janet. Sexual Politics in Modern Iran. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 287.
2. Keddie, Nikki R. Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution. Yale University Press, 2003, p. 239.
3. Milani, Farzaneh. Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers. Syracuse University Press, 1992, p. 104.

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

4. Moghissi, Haideh. Populism and Feminism in Iran. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, p. 67.

5. Islamic Penal Code (1983), Article 102.

6. Human Rights Watch. Iran: Women in Prison, Middle East Watch Report, 1991, p. 34.

7. Abrahamian, Ervand. Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran. University of California Press, 1999, p. 145.

8. Ibid, p. 138.

9. Iran Tribunal. Witness Testimonies, The Hague, 2013, Vol. I, p. 51.

10. Amnesty International. Iran: Violations of Human Rights, AI Report, 1989, p. 92.

11. Moghissi, Populism and Feminism in Iran, p. 103.

12. Sanasarian, Eliz. The Women's Rights Movement in Iran. Praeger, 1982, p. 132.

13. Testimony from Jameh Zanān, Paris, 1992, Issue 13.

14. Nimeh-ye Digar, Paris, 1985, Issue 4, p. 44.

15. Kayhan London, Interview with Shirin R., July 1994, Archive No. KHY-94-7-19.

Conclusion: The Gendered Machinery of Revolutionary Justice

The Islamic Republic's early years were marked not only by ideological consolidation but also by punitive social engineering—especially of women who were perceived as relics of the Pahlavi era or enemies of the Islamic moral order. This paper has traced how the apparatus of repression—including arrests, torture, compulsory hijab laws, and ideological re-education—was disproportionately wielded against women who had been employed by, or symbolically aligned with, the Shah's regime.

The revolution's public rhetoric may have promised justice and emancipation from tyranny, but for countless Iranian women, especially unveiled professionals and royalist-affiliated citizens, the post-1979 period introduced a new, more insidious form of violence. Their persecution was neither incidental nor circumstantial. It was part of a deliberate project of erasure—a remaking of the national identity through the control, humiliation, and silencing of the female body.[1]

Compulsory veiling became the regime's moral litmus test; refusal to comply was interpreted not as personal dissent but as political betrayal. Women's bodies were marked not just as sites of sin or modesty, but as archives of ideological history: if they had been unveiled before the revolution, they bore guilt; if they resisted veiling after it, they deserved punishment.[2]

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

What made this apparatus especially cruel was its fusion of religious doctrine with state violence. Women were not merely imprisoned or tortured for what they had done—they were punished for what they represented: modernity, secularism, professional independence, and association with a vanquished order.[3] Their clothing, professions, photographs, and even gestures became evidence in ideological trials designed not for justice, but for exemplary punishment.

This campaign of gendered repression ensured that the memory of the Shah's modernist ambitions—particularly his policies of female emancipation—was buried under layers of fear, shame, and coerced repentance.[4] It wasn't simply a rollback of civil liberties; it was an inversion of history. Women who had once served the state were reclassified as threats to the state. Their personal choices—about dress, education, or work—were reinterpreted as crimes against the revolution.

Yet even amid this brutal crackdown, women found ways to resist. Some wore the hijab in defiant styles; others taught banned subjects in underground circles. In exile, many bore witness. Their testimonies, though often fragmented by trauma and censorship, remain vital to reconstructing this chapter of Iran's history.[5]

This study offers only a partial window into the larger architecture of political violence in post-revolutionary Iran. It focuses specifically on women, but within that scope, it reveals a universal pattern: totalitarian regimes often consolidate power not merely through tanks and trials, but by rewriting gender, memory, and morality.

As Iran continues to face internal protests—many of them led by women—these historical patterns remain disturbingly relevant. The ghosts of those early victims still haunt the prison walls of Evin, Gharchak, and Qarchak Varamin. The struggle for bodily autonomy and ideological freedom persists. And unless the histories of these women are told with rigor and compassion, the machinery of repression will continue to operate, cloaked in silence.

Footnotes:

1. Abrahamian, Ervand. Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran. University of California Press, 1999, p. 213.
2. Moghissi, Haideh. Populism and Feminism in Iran. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, p. 88.
3. Afary, Janet. Sexual Politics in Modern Iran. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 295.
4. Sanasarian, Eliz. The Women's Rights Movement in Iran. Praeger, 1982, p. 149.
5. Nimeh-ye Digar, Paris, 1987, Issue 6, p. 42.

Yamin Mohammad Munshi (2026). Veils of Violence: The Torture of Women Associated with the Shah's Regime and Anti-Hijab Protesters in Post-Revolutionary Iran. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(5),411-428.

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