Iran chess referee says she won't return home after pictures without headscarf go viral in Iran

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An Iranian international chess referee has said she is afraid to return to home after state media published photographs of her apparently not wearing a hijab as is mandatory for women under Iranian law.

Shohreh Bayat, 32, became one of the most prominent Iranian women in international chess after she refereed the Women’s World Chess Championship in Shanghai this week.

But her achievement was overshadowed by a storm of controversy after she a photograph was published in which her hijab was not visible. Ms Bayat says she was in fact wearing the headscarf but the picture had already been widely circulated in Iran.

The chess master has since been bombarded with threats by Iranian conservatives and she fears she could be arrested if she returns home to Iran.

"I turned on my mobile and saw that my picture was everywhere, Ms Bayat told the BBC. “They were claiming I was not wearing a headscarf and that I wanted to protest against the hijab.”

She said Iran’s chess federation refused to write a letter guaranteeing her safety and instead tried to pressure her into writing an apology for the incident. She refused.

"There are many people in prison in Iran because of the headscarf. It's a very serious issue. Maybe they'd want to make an example of me," she said, adding that she was "totally panicked" by the situation.

Her case comes day after Iran’s only female Olympic medallist said she would not return to Iran and described herself as “one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran”.

Kimia Alizadeh, 21, won a bronze medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. In a statement posted online, she said she would no longer wear be forced to wear the hijab and said Iranian officials had used her as “a tool”.

“Whatever they said, I wore,” she said. “Every sentence they ordered, I repeated.” She described the decision to leave Iran as difficult, but necessary.