‘They used our hijabs to gag us’: Iran protesters tell of rapes, beatings and torture by police

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<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/06/iran-protesters-police-rapes-beatings-and-torture>

On the evening of 15 October 2022, when the [street protests in Iran](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/10/gunshots-mahsa-amini-protests-iran-death-police-custody-kurdish) following the death of Mahsa Amini were at their peak, 25-year-old Dorsa\* was stopped at a checkpoint while driving through a city in the country’s northern Gilan province.

The checkpoint was chaotic; 25 to 30 heavily armed security officers were shouting and screaming at people to get out of their vehicles.

Dorsa was with her sister and two male friends. Their car was searched and when two cans of spray paint were found in her sister’s bag, all hell broke loose.

The sisters claim they were blindfolded and had their hands tied behind their back before they were pushed into the rear of a police car. Dorsa says they were taken to a building where they were forced to sign a confession saying they had been protesting, before being separated. Alone in an interrogation room, Dorsa says she could hear the screams of her two male friends being tortured nearby.

When it was her turn to be interrogated, Dorsa says she was beaten and punched repeatedly while security forces screamed that she was a whore and a traitor. She claims to have been force fed the little plastic balloons that protesters had been filling with red paint to use against police on the streets. Finally, she was taken to another room.

“[They] covered my face with my scarf and I couldn’t see anything. I was stripped naked and told that a lady doctor would come into the room and examine me. Minutes later, someone came to the room and when they touched me, I knew it was a man,” she says.

“He kept touching me everywhere and then took an object and inserted it inside my vagina. He kept penetrating me with the object, while with the other hand, he was rubbing all over my body. I froze and was still in pain from the punches I had received during interrogation. I lay there for I don’t know how long. He then left.”

More than four months after [the death of Mahsa Amini](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/oct/31/mapping-irans-unrest-how-mahsa-aminis-death-led-to-nationwide-protests), the Kurdish woman who died in custody after being arrested for incorrectly wearing her hijab, the Iranian authorities’ attempts to crush nationwide protests have seen more than 500 people killed by security forces, including 70 children. Four protesters have so far been [executed by the state](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/07/iran-executes-two-men-over-alleged-crimes-during-protests-judiciary-says), with many more facing the death sentence.

According to the latest report by [Human Rights Activists in Iran](https://www.hra-iran.org/en/), 19,603 individuals have been arrested in connection with the protests and remain in detention.

Dorsa was driven around for hours before being released at a remote location outside the city at 3am. When she got home, she vomited and lay awake for the rest of the night.

In the days that followed, Dorsa says she saw a doctor who confirmed she had been raped with an object, which had caused an infection. This took months to heal. She says she has suffered a mental breakdown.

“I am traumatised and have been seeing a psychiatrist. I’m on medication and I panic every time I have to go to hospital for checkups,” she says. “I’m just completely broken.”

This week, [Amnesty International released a detailed report](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/30/iranian-protesters-tortured-amnesty-report) confirming allegations of rape, violence and “extreme torture” of protesters in detention.

Amnesty International says that three young protesters – Arshia Takdastan, 18, Mehdi Mohammadifard, 19, and Javad Rouhi, 31 – were subjected to “gruesome torture including floggings, electric shocks, being hung upside down and death threats at gunpoint”. The human rights organisation also said that one of the men was raped and another sexually assaulted by guards while in detention.

The Guardian has spoken to 11 protesters, women and men, who claim that they were also subjected to rape, sexual violence, beatings and torture while being detained by security forces. Some say they were assaulted in a police van or on the streets; others while in custody in police stations or prisons.

A nurse from a hospital in Gilan says she has encountered several women in the past few months who showed signs of sexual assault and rape.

“I’ve treated at least five female protesters under 30 who came in with vaginal infections and told me they were assaulted in police custody. Some of them were bleeding from their genitals,” she says.

Sara\*, a woman in her 40s from Sanandaj, in the Kurdistan region, says security forces have used sexual violence and beatings to quell the protests since they erupted across [Iran](https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran) last September.

She says she was arrested during that first wave of protests and sexually assaulted by security officers.

“There were eight officers and they dragged me to a waiting car. All the while, they kept kicking me violently. They were touching my breasts, my buttocks, putting their hands between my thighs and pressing against my private parts,” she says.

“There were three more girls already in the vehicle who were arrested before me. They used our hijabs to gag our mouths. When they were approaching me to cover my mouth, I asked why were they now OK to have my hair uncovered? They responded with kicks to my back and legs. One of these women was so badly beaten that she lay paralysed. She didn’t move an inch. She was later taken to hospital.”

When the police finally took her to prison, she says there were 70 other women there, all showing signs of beatings and assault. Sara was interrogated for hours every day for two weeks before being released.

“I haven’t told my husband about being sexually assaulted. He loves me and this will break him,” she says. “I don’t know if I should confide in my family. I guess this is the price to pay for freedom.”

Human Rights Watch (HRW), which has also documented serious abuses and sexual assault of protesters in detention, said the international community was failing to try to stop the torture.

“Iranian authorities have dramatically escalated abuses against protesters in custody,” said an HRW spokesperson. “Governments seeking to hold Iran accountable for rights violations should pay special attention to the serious abuses against detainees.”

Condemning the reports of torture and rape, members of the European parliament have also called on the western authorities to designate Iran’s Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) as a terror group.

Kamyar\*, a 30-year-old from Mashhad, claims that he was sexually assaulted by police in a van on 9 November as he joined protests to [mark 40 days after “Bloody Friday”](https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-cities-strike-in-solidarity-with-bloody-friday-dead/6827591.html), where dozens of demonstrators were gunned down in the city of Zahedan by security forces.

“We weren’t even chanting slogans when male officers approached me and took me to a police van,” he says “There were two of them – one rubbed himself on my penis from the front, and the other assaulted me from behind. I still find it hard to talk about. I don’t even remember their faces. I don’t want to.”

As the regime continues to hand down long prison sentences, protests have dwindled across the country. However, protests are continuing in the Kurdish regions and Sistan-Baluchistan province despite a growing crackdown by the security forces.

Kamyar said the security forces believe sexually assaulting activists will stop them from protesting.

“Somehow they think the humiliation is pinned on us. It’s on them. One of them told me, ‘It’s been 60 days and we have not been able to sleep because of you protesters.’ He slapped me after every insult,” he says. “But I don’t pity myself, I pity these men who are disgusting and live small lives. They should be the ones who feel humiliated, instead of us victims.”

\* *Names have been changed*