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WOMEN'S RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN IRAN

UPR of Iran 48th Session



UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR) STAKEHOLDER SUBMISSION

ZAMANEH MEDIA AND THE CENTRE FOR SUPPORTERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS (CSHR)

Joint Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Iran

48th Session of the Working Group on the UPR Human Rights Council
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	The Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR) is a non-governmental organization established in 2012. It is dedicated to advocating for sustainable peace and democracy in Iran and the broader Middle East by promoting human rights. Its mission is to foster the development of peace and security founded on human rights, justice, and equality for all individuals and communities.
	Zamaneh Media is an independent Persian language media organization in exile based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The organization was established in 2006 to support the development of media plurality in Iran (and other Persian speaking countries). Radio Zamaneh, the organization's primary editorial platform, began as a radio broadcaster but has, since 2017, carried on its name as an online news medium. Zamaneh serves to inform and create awareness about a multitude of subjects in Iran and its surroundings through an impartial lens. A space for alternative voices missed in mainstream Persian media, Zamaneh accents topics concerning human rights, labor rights, the LGBTIQ+ community, women and ethnic minorities.

Title:	Iran: State Obligation towards Women's Rights Defenders
Recommendations for:	The Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran)
Submitting Organization:	The Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR)
Primary Contact:	Sara Kain
Email:	la@csshr.org.uk
Address:	UK

WOMEN'S RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN IRAN



UPR of Iran 48th Session

1. Zamaneh Media, an independent Persian-language media organization based in Amsterdam, systematically monitors, analyses, and publishes content on gender-based violence and discrimination in Iran. The Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR)'s main areas of work include promoting gender equality, advocating for minority rights, supporting the legal community in defending human rights, ensuring fair trial rights for victims, empowering civil society organizations and movements, and advocating for policy and legal reforms.
2. In the third UPR cycle, Iran supported recommendations by the Dominica Republic (26.231), Japan (26.234), Kyrgyzstan (26.235), Lao People's Democratic Republic (26.236), Tunisia (26.249), and Nepal (26.261) that called on the government to pass legislation and government policies that support, empower and protect the rights of women. Over the past four years, there has been an escalation in state pressure on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs). This has been particularly evident following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini and the emergence of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) movement, prompting Iranian security authorities to intensify their suppression of organized activities by WHRD groups and grassroots initiatives. In fact, the escalation of the repression of protestors calling for protection of women resulted in the UN taking the necessary steps to establish the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran to investigate the gross human rights violations taking place in Iran since September 2022. This report examines the widespread and systemic repression faced by WHRDs in the country. All references are sourced from primary information collected by Zamaneh Media during its documentation and reporting of the protests.
3. WHRDs in Iran have been pivotal in the struggle for gender equality and human rights, particularly in the wake of the WLF movement. The death of Jina Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022 sparked protests and highlighted the oppression faced by women in Iran. This movement united a diverse group of WHRDs campaigning against gender-based violence and inequality. Despite their essential work, these defenders face severe challenges, including restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association. WHRDs in Iran endure gender-specific threats such as sexual violence, defamation, and arbitrary arrests. Unfortunately, the Islamic Republic of Iran has used its laws and policies to hinder the efforts of WHRDs seeking change. This submission aims to highlight the challenges faced by WHRDs in Iran, showcase their resilience under unfavourable conditions and call for stronger international mechanisms to protect and support them. It is crucial for the international community to recognize the contributions of Iranian WHRDs and take concrete steps to ensure their safety and empowerment. Women Human Rights Defenders in Iran face increasing repression through:
 - **Weaponization of Legislation:** The legal system is used to stifle dissent and silence advocacy for gender equality and human rights.
 - **Criminalization of Advocacy:** Women protesting against gender discrimination and human rights abuses are often accused of broad and vague crimes such as "acting against national security," "propaganda against the state," and "spreading corruption on earth." These charges, frequently without

evidence, result in long prison sentences, fines, and professional bans.

- **Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions:** Authorities employ arbitrary arrests and detentions to intimidate WHRDs, who are held without formal charges, denied legal representation, and face prolonged pre-trial detention under poor conditions with limited family contact.
- **Legislation Targeting Activism:** Laws such as the Cybercrime Law and the Anti-Terrorism Law target online activism and peaceful protests, enabling surveillance, harassment, and prosecution of those using digital platforms to support women's rights.
- **Suppression of Peaceful Assembly:** Authorities frequently deny permits for WHRD-organized demonstrations. Unauthorized protests are met with excessive force, resulting in arrests, injuries, and fatalities, with detained protesters facing severe legal reprisals.
- **Intimidation and Harassment:** WHRDs endure pervasive intimidation and harassment, with security forces conducting raids, confiscating materials, and arresting individuals without warrants. Family members of WHRDs are also targeted, instilling fear and discouraging activism.

Human Rights Violations in Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" Protests

4. Documentation of Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) protests underscores the plight of unaffiliated protestors facing serious charges such as "destruction of public facilities", "disruption of public order", and "incitement to violence". These individuals often lack supportive networks, rendering them more susceptible to serious charges linked to national security. While many participants in WLF movement have been released, others remain incarcerated facing severe national security charges. While many participants in the WLF movement have been released, others remain incarcerated facing severe national security charges like "propaganda against the state" and "assembly and collusion against national security," consistent with previous practices. In at least 20 cases documented by Zamaneh Media, released protestors have recounted instances of excessive violence during arrests, including physical abuse and sexual insults, supported by both testimonies and visual evidence.¹ Some WLF detainees have been pardoned by Iran, but other grassroots affiliated women's rights defenders remain in custody, charged with offenses such as "propaganda against the state" and "assembly and collusion against national security".
5. There is a trend of security agents using excessive force, with increasing reports of sexual violence during arrest and interrogation, affecting both female and male detainees. A "Committee to Follow Up on the Detainees of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement" has been formed by a network of activists, lawyers, and women's rights defenders inside and outside Iran to verify and collect data on those arrested during WLF movement.² Shiva Nazar Ahari, a committee member, has shared with Zamaneh the trends observed in the Committee's data collection efforts and reported accounts from detainees who experienced excessive violence by security agents during arrests.³
6. In supported recommendation 26.142, Canada called on Iran to "ensure freedom from torture while in detention." However, female detainees increasingly report sexual violence—both physical and verbal—occurring during arrest and interrogation. There are also reports of sexual assault against male prisoners, with particular testimony recounting plain clothes agents forcing oral sex on a 19-year-old male protester. Masoud Kazemi, a journalist, confirms another similar experience by a 21-year-old

female protester who was arrested in Tehran, later transferred to a fire station, and sexually assaulted by plainclothes forces.⁴ The family of Elham Modaressi, a 32-year-old artists of Kurdish ethnic background living in the city of Karaj, who was arrested on 2 November 2022, told Zamaneh Media that despite having Sclerosing Cholangitis with Ulcerative Colitis, she was both physically and psychologically tortured during interrogations, including subjected to sexual insults.⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ratify the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) without any reservations and incorporate its principles into domestic law.
2. Ensure the right to peaceful assembly is respected and protected. Security forces should be trained in non-violent crowd control techniques and held accountable for any use of excessive force against demonstrators.
3. Take concrete steps to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, against prisoners, in accordance with the provisions of CAT and Implement special measures to protect vulnerable groups in detention, including women, children, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and ethnic or religious minorities, from all forms of violence and discrimination.
4. Amend laws and regulations to facilitate rather than restrict peaceful assembly, ensuring that any limitations on protests are necessary and proportionate.
5. Establish effective mechanisms for victims of human rights violations to seek redress, including prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations and adequate reparations.

Crackdown on Women Human Rights Defenders

7. During and after the “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF) movement, Iranian authorities intensified their crackdown on WHRDs, targeting independent hubs, groups, safe houses, and shelters. At the start of the protest movement, security forces in Iran and other cities arrested prominent WHRDs not only on the streets but also in organized raids and with Judiciary-issued warrants. Those arrested in Tehran included Leila Mansour, Zahra Mehrabi, Sarvenaz Ahmadi (also a child labour activist), Naghmeh Rajabifar, Iman Behpasand, Mahsa Gholamalizadeh, Narges Hosseini, Bahar Aslani, Saba Sherdoost (arrested in Arak but active in Tehran), Mojgan Ilanlou, Roghayeh Bigdeli, Shiva Shabani, and Fatemeh Erfanian and Marzieh Ziari among others.⁶
8. Many of the WHRDs arrested in organized raids were interrogated for their connections with other WHRD networks in the country, including those in Kurdish cities and in Gilan. Two women's rights defenders arrested during and after the WLF informed Zamaneh journalist that during interrogations, security agents sought information on the organizers of protests, the coordination of protest locations, and the dissemination of protest calls in Tehran, Sanandaj, Marivan, and Rasht. These WHRDs were questioned about their activities both online and in organizing demonstrations related to the Shalir Rasouli and Jina Mahsa Amini protests.

9. Many WHRDs, particularly those in NGOs and grassroots organizations, were not included in the mass pardons of WLF prisoners. Among those arrested in connection with WHRD activism, Sarvenaz Ahmadi, a feminist and child labour activist, received severe sentences and is currently serving a six-year prison term under Judge Abolqasem Salavati's court ruling. Ahmadi was sentenced to five years for "assembly and collusion to act against national security" and one year for "propaganda against the state." Despite being arrested during the WLF movement, security forces and Judiciary officials did not include her in the group of prisoners pardoned after the crackdown.⁷ Sarvenaz Ahmadi remains imprisoned, as does her husband Kamyar Fakour, who faces similar charges. Samaneh Asghari, an activist for women's and children's rights, was also not pardoned despite being arrested during the WLF movement. On 3 April 2024, security forces raided her home to return her to prison to serve a one-year sentence, even though she had been granted furlough. Asghari was one of the WHRDs who were arrested in organized raids with warrants during the WLF movement.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Become a party to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without any reservations and incorporate its principles into domestic law.
2. Take measures to safeguard and uphold the rights of women's rights defenders (WRDs), especially amidst heightened repression targeting women's groups and grassroots organizations subsequent to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) movement. This includes ceasing all forms of violence and harassment against WRDs and ensuring adherence to the principles of freedom of association as stipulated in Articles 7, 9, 21, and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Targeting of Kurdish Women's Rights Defenders

10. Ethnic minority women's rights groups, notably active in Kurdish regions, bear a disproportionate impact from the crackdown on WHRDs. Two weeks prior to the start of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) movement, following a violent incident in Marivan involving an attempted rape leading to death, women in Kurdistan organized protests attributing femicide to state policies. This was in response to the attempted rape and murder of Shalir Rasouli in Marivan, Kurdistan, during the week of 8 September 2022, just preceding nationwide protests sparked by the state-perpetrated killing of Jina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022.
11. In response to these incidents, women's rights defenders in Kurdistan organized protests, attributing the prevalence of femicide in the country to state policies and laws.⁹ Security agents in Kurdistan subsequently arrested numerous women's rights defenders during and after the WLF protests, attributing the unrest to their activities. Over 15 defenders were detained across Kurdish cities following the protests, including Jina Modarres-Gorji, Monireh Mohammadi, Soraya Khodri, Bayan Azizi, Farideh Nemati, Gelaleh Vatandoust, Hayat Almasi, Shila Kurdistani, Susan

Razan, Faranak Rafiyi, Baran Saedi, Mahro Hedayati, Azadeh Jamati, Bahar Zangiband, Goshin Mohammadian, Nazila Maroufian, Negar Davoodi, Soheila Khaledian (also an activist in education), and Rizan Ahmadi. In Sanandaj's "Correctional Center," Zamaneh documented the arrest of at least 5 women's rights defenders.¹⁰

12. Among those arrested during the WLF movement, Jina Modarres-Gorji, a Kurdish journalist and advocate, received a notably severe sentence. Modarres-Gorji, whose bookstore in Sanandaj serves as a focal point for women's rights activism, was targeted by authorities after her arrest. Initially released on 3 June 2023 after 84 days in custody, she was charged with multiple offenses, including "forming a group to overthrow the government," "collaborating against national security," and "propaganda against the state."¹¹ Authorities subsequently closed her bookstore. On 25 May 2024, the Islamic Revolution Court sentenced Modarres-Gorji to 21 years in prison and exile to Hamedan prison, nearly 200 km from her hometown. The court imposed additional serious national security charges, sentencing her to ten years for "establishing an illegal group with the aim of overthrowing the government," another ten years for "collaborating with hostile groups and countries," and one year for "propaganda against the state," with ten years of the sentence deemed executable. In its verdict, the court specifically attributed responsibility to Modarres-Gorji for founding the Zhivano Association with feminist ideals aimed at overthrowing the government, participating in subversive gatherings and slogans, communicating with anti-revolutionary actors, attending conferences and workshops, disseminating content online, and being interviewed by foreign media to portray a negative image of the country following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini. Citing concerns over potential security threats of her activism, the court ordered her transfer to Hamedan prison.¹²

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cease the harassment of women's rights groups belonging to ethnic minorities and end the practice of imposing long prison sentences on their members. The state should ensure the protection of the rights of these groups to freely advocate for their causes, in line with international human rights standards, and promote an inclusive environment that respects and supports the activism of all ethnic communities.
2. Combat and prevent State reprisals against protests and end monitoring and reporting on women in Iran, while ensuring effective protection for women against all forms of violence, harassment, abuse, and torture.

Crackdown on Women's Rights Defenders in Gilan: Intimidation Tactics and Unjust Sentences

13. The Islamic Republic of Iran has targeted independent grassroots and organized efforts in support of women's rights in Gilan province with intimidation tactics, including harassment, excessive force, and violence against women's rights defenders (WRDs). 11 WRDs were sentenced to over 60 years in prison for their activism.

14. The Revolutionary Court in Gilan province, northern Iran, sentenced 11 women's rights activists who were arrested on the eve of the WLF anniversary to over 60 years in prison. Judge Mehdi Raskhi of the third branch of the Rasht Revolutionary Court handed down the sentences. Zohreh Dadras received a total of 9 years and 6 months in prison, with six years and one day for the charge of "forming a group with the aim of disrupting national security," and three years and six months and one day for "assembly and collusion against national security." Forough Saminia, Sara Jahani, Yasamin Hashdari, Shiva Shah-Siah, Negin Rezaie, Matin Yazdani, Azadeh Chavoshian, and Zahra Dadras were each sentenced to six years, three months, and seven days in prison. They received three years and six months and one day for "assembly and collusion with the intention of disrupting national security," and two years and seven months and 16 days for "membership in an illegal group." Jelveh Javaheri and Houman Taheri were each sentenced to one year in prison on charges of "propaganda against the state."¹³
15. On the night of 16 August 2023, security forces from the Ministry of Intelligence in Gilan conducted raids on the residences of the aforementioned women's rights activists, employing excessive force during their arrests, including physical assault. Sara Jahani and Zahra and Zohreh Dadras were subjected to additional beatings while in custody for refusing to provide their phone passwords to the officers. Yasamin Hashdari experienced severe heart palpitations and a nervous breakdown during interrogations, requiring medical attention at a center in Rasht. Houman Taheri, the sole male among the group, endured severe beatings, with security forces using sexual slurs multiple times during the assault. On 17 August 2023, the General Directorate of Intelligence in Gilan province linked these detainees to "foreign elements," alleging their involvement in "planning and inciting chaos and vandalism on the anniversary of last fall's riots" in Gilan and Kurdistan.¹⁴
16. In June 2024, Zohreh Dadras disclosed following her conviction that the arrests were linked to a women's group they had established on the messaging app Telegram to support women's rights. She expressed disbelief at being charged merely for forming a friendly group on Telegram. Dadras questioned how such an act in the virtual realm could equate to national security charges: "Of course, this is unbelievable to me. How can forming a Telegram group in the virtual space be associated with charges typically linked to organizing armed groups or bombers?" Dadras further recounted that plainclothes security forces, armed with firearms including machine guns, conducted raids on their homes in Gilan. The arrest was particularly traumatic for Zahra Dadras' children, who were awoken by armed men seizing their mother. During the arrest and subsequent interrogations, Zahra Dadras, who suffers from severe iron deficiency, anemia, and cancerous masses, was denied access to medical care and her necessary medications. All those detained in connection with this case reported experiencing violence, including sexual insults, and were denied access to legal representation.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support and allow women's grassroots organizations, groups, and activists to continue their work by upholding the rights to freedom of association, assembly, and expression, ensuring that women can advocate for their rights and participate in civil society without fear of punishment.
2. Support and cooperate with all international efforts, including the UN Fact-Finding Mission investigating the human rights violations in Iran related to the protests that began in September 2022, especially with respect to women's rights defenders belonging to minority groups, and establish the facts and circumstances surrounding the alleged violations.

Targeted Raids on a Women Safehouse in West Azerbaijan

17. On April 29, 2024, officials from the West Azerbaijan Province Welfare Organization raided and evacuated Mehr Shams Afarid House, an independent shelter for battered women operated by WHRDs. Despite its positive relationship with the provincial judiciary, the shelter was targeted due to the activism of its members, including the director Fatemeh Babakhani, who is a lawyer and WHRD.¹⁶ Fatemeh Babakhani previously reported that officers entered the premises, harassed her regarding her support for the WLF movement, conducted a thorough inspection of the organization's financial records, and indicated their intention to relocate all residents to a social emergency site. According to Babakhani, all residents of the shelter possess judicial support orders as victims of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse.
18. State officials targeted the safe house due to the social activism of Fatemeh Babakhani and others associated with the facility. Babakhani further mentioned that authorities expressed concerns over her use of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" hashtag on personal social media accounts, prompting her to remove the hashtag in response. Despite this, state harassment persisted, resulting in the closure of the safe house and the relocation of its residents, until women's rights defenders managed to reopen the facility after more than seven days of closure despite the anticipated ongoing harassment.¹⁷ Established in 2019, Mehr Shams Afarid Safe House began providing specialized services in the same year after official registration, offering refuge to over 50 women who suffer severe domestic violence on a monthly basis. the shelter provides essential services, including housing, legal assistance, and medical support.¹⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure the safety and security of safe houses and shelters for women, allowing them to operate without interference, and uphold the rights of women to seek refuge and assistance free from fear of reprisal or persecution.

Denying Medical Care to Women's Rights Defenders Who Refuse to Wear the Hijab

19. On 5 March 2024, Sedigheh Vasmaghi, an Iranian female Islamic jurist, reported to serve her prison sentence after ceasing to wear the headscarf in public as a gesture of support for "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. She faced charges of "propaganda against the State" and "appearing without religious hijab in public".¹⁹ On 16 March 2024, she was arbitrarily arrested and taken to Evin prison while refusing to

wear the hijab even during her arrest. Prior to her arrest, Vasmaghi had openly challenged Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, questioning his interpretations of hijab and women's rights in Islamic Shiite jurisprudence.²⁰ During her imprisonment, authorities denied her visitation rights and adequate medical care, conditioning her access to medical treatment on wearing the hijab.²¹ Despite suffering from Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) and experiencing partial vision loss, she did not receive proper medical monitoring or timely care, leading to further deterioration in her vision, as reported by her husband on 25 April 2024.²² She was released on medical emergency furlough on 30 April 2024.²³

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure that all detainees, including women's rights defenders, have access to due process, legal representation, and medical care in accordance with international human rights standards, without conditioning these rights on the wearing of the hijab.
2. Strengthen the independence and impartiality of the judiciary to guarantee fair trials. Judges and legal professionals should be free from political influence and corruption.

Forced Confinement of Women's Rights Activist to Mental Hospital

20. The Islamic Republic uses "madness" verdicts as a disciplinary tactic to stigmatize WHRDs and activists, framing their activism as a mental health issue and forcibly confining them to mental hospitals. An illustrative example is the arrest of Roya Zakari in Tabriz. In October 2023, a viral video from Tabriz depicted Roya Zakari, a 31-year-old computer science graduate student, being harassed by officers while protesting against the Morality Police. She was arrested that same day and subsequently confined to Razi Mental Hospital in Tabriz²⁴ under a claim of mental instability.
21. Another illustrative example involves a WHRD and protester who spoke to Zamaneh under the condition of anonymity. She confirmed that after her arrest during the WLF movement, she was forcibly confined to Aminabad Mental Hospital in Tehran without her family being informed of her whereabouts. After two months of enforced hospitalization, she was allowed to contact her family. During her confinement, she was severely beaten and forced to take medication.²⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Islamic Republic of Iran must cease the practice of framing women's rights activists as mentally ill and confining them to mental hospitals as a form of punishment. Such actions constitute a severe violation of human rights and serve to stigmatize and silence legitimate activism.

Heightened Penalties and Harsher Sentences for Persistent Activism

22. After the crackdown on the WLF movement, women's rights activists are now receiving harsher sentences. For example, Atena Farghadani, a cartoonist and prominent women's rights activist who had previously been imprisoned as a political

dissident, was violently re-arrested on April 14, 2024, resulting in severe injuries to her face and head. Farghadani had planned to display a cartoon depicting the harassment by security forces against her and her family when she was forcibly detained by agents of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who severely beat her, causing injuries to her face and head. She was subsequently taken to an IRGC safehouse where the abuse continued. On June 11, 2024, she was sentenced to a total of six years in prison: five years for “insulting sanctities” and one year for “propaganda against the state.” These charges arose from her attempt to display her cartoon in public.²⁶ On June 23, 2024, Atefeh Rangriz, a WHRD, was summoned on additional charges of “propaganda against the state,” “publishing falsehoods to disrupt public opinion,” and “forming a group with the intention of disrupting national security,” despite having an ongoing case from her arrest less than a year ago in Damghan city. The new charges come despite the fact that she has not been active since her initial arrest. Atefeh Rangriz posted on social media that her latest case is part of ongoing harassment by security forces against WHRDs. On June 29, 2024, she appeared at the Prosecutor's Office of the Damghan General and Revolutionary Court, where she was promptly arrested and taken to prison.²⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure full respect for the rights to freedom of assembly and association, as guaranteed under Articles 26 and 27 of its Constitution, by taking effective measures to protect individuals and groups, including women’s rights defenders, and ensuring they are free from harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention.
2. Repeal or amend vaguely worded articles in the Islamic Penal Code that address, in broad terms, national security and which restrict and unfairly criminalize or otherwise suppress peaceful expression, association and assembly.

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<https://www.radiozamaneh.com/742614/>

² The data that the Committee collects is regularly updated and is available for public use in this spreadsheet:

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³ "Narratives Of Sexual Torture Of Citizens Arrested During Protests Against The Killing Of Mahsa Amini", 2022, October 26, Radio Zamaneh, Retrieved from: <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/737632/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁵ "No to Oppression of Women: Twitter Protest Against 'Heavy Judicial Sentences Against Women from Kurdistan to Gilan'", 2024, June 11, Radio Zamaneh, Retrieved from: <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/821884> and "Interview with Zohreh Dadras, Women's Rights Activist: Conditions in Rasht Detention Center and Prison", 2024, June 3: Iranian Women Organization, Retrieved from: <https://ir-women.com/19642>
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