



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Sharon Kleinbaum, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you Vice Chair Cooper and welcome to all of our participants as well as our audience members.

Women and girls have been at the forefront of the fight for freedom of religion or belief in Iran. Building on a long tradition of protest, Iranian women and girls today have shown unprecedented levels of commitment to their rights in the face of grave danger. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have resisted the government's insistence that it should have the power to decide on their behalf whether they wear *hijab*. Today, their mass refusal to abide by laws that violate their fundamental freedoms poses a serious threat to a government that has weaponized religion to rule through force and fear.

It is reprehensible that Iran's government has responded to the peaceful assertion of religious freedom with violence. Among those it has killed are children, including a 9 year-old boy named Kian Pirfalak. Iranian security forces have beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed girls who participated in protests against mandatory *hijab*. After 16 year-old Nika Shakarimi was detained and beaten to death, Iranian authorities falsely claimed she had committed suicide, pressured her family not to hold a funeral, and buried her without her family's consent in a cemetery 25 miles away from her home.

In December, activist Narges Mohammadi, who is serving a 16-year sentence at Evin prison, revealed detailed evidence that Iranian prison officials are systematically using sexual violence, including rape, against women protesters detained at Evin and Qarchak prisons. Security forces and interrogators have handcuffed, groped, and sexually molested women, all of which has been reported on multiple occasions to Iranian government officials.

This violence is not a side effect of poor training or lax enforcement. It is a deliberate strategy by the government of Iran to shame and silence women and girls asserting their religious freedom. It is an attack on the dignity and autonomy of women in a society with strong and religiously-grounded norms of sexual conservatism.

USCIRF unreservedly condemns the Iranian state's weaponization of gender and sexuality to restrict freedom of religion or belief. Gender based violence in the name of religion, furthermore, is not a niche issue. An attack on anyone's religious freedom, be they traditional or liberal, theist or nontheist, straight or gay, is an attack on everyone's religious freedom. Equal protection is only as strong as its weakest link. As such, the Biden administration must continue to call out Iran's attacks on the religious freedom of women and support full accountability for Iranian officials complicit in these violations.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back to Chair Turkel.