

Iranians break taboos with their own version of #MeToo

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Decades-old sexual trauma is being unearthed in a society that rarely speaks about it but can change come to fruition?

Tehran, Iran – Countless Iranians have taken to social media in recent weeks to recount their experiences of sexual abuse, bringing to the fore a topic that remained taboo for years.

Iran's version of the #MeToo movement has seen candid accounts of sexual trauma – some dating back decades – being shared, and has already led to at least one arrest.

Tehran Police Chief Hossein Rahimi announced in late August that a suspect had been arrested based on these disclosures. The man, a former student at Tehran University, was apprehended after numerous young women, many of them university students, described how he drugged and raped them in his house.

Allegations have also been levelled against several prominent Iranians, two of whom have released statements denying the accusations and threatening legal action against their accusers.

Sexual harassment at work

Several revelations are related to sexual abuse in the workplace, including in at least one major company.

A female former employee of the company detailed how a male executive, who was married with children, would take every opportunity to proposition employees, who would have no way of stopping the abuse.

"After all, you couldn't tell the boss, 'I don't want to sleep with you,' because a bitter fate would await you," she wrote in a Twitter thread.

She and several other former and current employees explained how some colleagues had taken the matter up with the human resources department, led by a woman, only to be dismissed and fired. The former head of HR, who has since left the company, found herself hounded by public social media comments denouncing her as an accomplice after the issue came to light.

The company's CEO reacted quickly to the viral story, accepting responsibility and apologising. He also announced that the firm had launched an anonymous whistle-blowing platform to increase accountability.

Iranian law does not specifically recognise sexual abuse in the workplace and provides no support for victims of workplace abuse from being fired.

Last year, a subsidiary of Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology became the first government agency to [publish in-house guidelines](#) aimed at combating sexual harassment. The guidelines have been adopted by a number of major tech companies. It is unclear whether the company linked with sexual abuse allegations is one of them.

Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Masoumeh Ebtekar on August 28 became the first senior official to [respond](#) to the online movement, praising victims for speaking up.

"There is a lack of access to the right information and correct education and this creates the grounds for sexual violence and abuse," the most senior woman in the government said in an interview, adding that she is working with the Ministry of Education to amend the situation before the end of President Hassan Rouhani's tenure in less than a year.

Ebtekar also pointed out that the government has held more than two dozen review sessions for a pending bill to combat violence against women, legislation she hoped would soon make its way to the parliament.

Victim-shaming and stigma

But the challenges that prevent victims of sexual abuse from coming forward go beyond the deficiencies of the education system, to the lack of a wider support system that leaves them feeling vulnerable and unwilling to tell anyone they had had a forced sexual encounter.

Women who report sexual abuse often find themselves on the receiving end of questions about how they were dressed or insinuations that they may have somehow provoked the attack.

In response to that, a Twitter user by the name of Fatemah [shared](#) a photo of herself clad in a full niqab that showed only her eyes accompanied with the comment: "I wish you would show me one of the people who insist that harassment and abuse and rape happen because of the victim's way of dressing so I could ask them 'if it's about the way you dress then how is it that even I face harassment?'"

In addition to victim-shaming and the social stigma tied to sexual harassment, the legal process of holding sexual offenders to account can be daunting.

In Iran's Islamic laws, rape has not been defined as a standalone concept. Types of sexual abuse, including rape, have been recognised under the umbrella of "zina", an Islamic legal term referring to a range of unlawful sexual activity, most prominent among which are extramarital affairs.

This means a woman accusing someone of sexual abuse would have to prove it in court or potentially face charges of engaging in sexual activity outside marriage.

If the charge of rape is proven, it could carry the death penalty for the offender.

The law also does not recognise marital sexual abuse or rape. Coupled with some of the other tenets of Islamic law that give much of the power in a marriage to the husband, this means an untold number of married women suffer in silence.

"I wouldn't sleep with him in the last year of [married] life, until I told him at the height of our differences that my applications to move to Germany are coming through," one woman [wrote](#) on Twitter. "It was two months of rape every night so he wouldn't prevent me from leaving the country".

In Iran, an adult woman requires the written consent of her husband, or father if she is unmarried, to leave the country.

According to lawyer Marzieh Mohebi, Iran needs to introduce new legislation that would explicitly criminalise sexual assault and focus on providing mental and physical health support to victims.

“Penal policy based on severe suppression, elimination and ostracisation, without obligating offenders to compensate victims and without providing social support for victims, can neither prove effective nor claim to exact justice,” she told Al Jazeera.

In a [tweet](#) that went viral, Mohebi announced she will represent victims of sexual violence free of charge as her “share in fighting sexual abuse of women”.

Since then, she said, many women who had suffered different abuse in silence for a long time contacted her for consultations or to pursue legal action.

A wake-up call

Mohebi sees the Iranian #MeToo movement as a serious wake-up call.

“A wake-up call to a discourse that views victims as accomplices, culprits and provocateurs and at times, considers victims deserving of penalty. To a culture in which, at times, families eliminate the helpless and marginalised victims with the excuse of maintaining honour.”

She believes the movement is crucial in that it breaks taboos in a patriarchal society and lets offenders know they cannot escape consequences easily.

Even as a part of society is still prone to blaming the victims, there has been an outpouring of support on social media.

Many users are posting messages including: “If I’m following your abuser, DM me and I will unfollow them,” and “Your story matters.”

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