



**United Nations  
Entity for Gender Equality and  
the Empowerment of Women**

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**Abuses Relating to Mandatory  
Dress Codes**

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**Note by the Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the UNCSW the topic synopsis entitled "Prevention of Women's Rights Abuses Relating to Mandatory Dress Codes." (SP/CSW/SYN/IIF/00.2).



## **Prevention of Women's Rights Abuses Relating to Mandatory Dress Codes**

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### **Section I—Introduction**

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, commonly known as UN Women, focuses on the empowerment of women and equality between all the genders. UN Women challenges countries to meet the needs of women by holding them accountable to more global standards. By enforcing governing action within participating countries, civil society can change as a result.

### **Section II—Background Information**

In recent times, regulation of women's clothing has been met with growing resistance resulting in a drastic increase in violence towards women. As of 2015, it is recorded that more than ten countries have implemented conservative laws that restrict women's dress code. Social media and near instantaneous communications have brought an international eye and a more global evaluation of whether the laws enacted are an abridging of what the global community considers basic human rights. This, by extension, calls into question the means by which a country's religious leadership enforces their particular vision and mandate. Is it appropriate for a country to retain a rigid and conservative code of dress and expectation of behavior as a rejection of what they perceive as corrupting modern influence? Or, are the values held by the global community, especially as it relates to the rights of women, more highly esteemed than what is held as sacred virtue? Ultimately, the international community has provided a mirror in which women under a morality-driven religious mandate can compare themselves.

The painful reality in many of these countries brimming with religious zeal is that retribution for protest is swift and deadly. Punishment for the violation of reactionary religious mandates often includes house arrest, incarceration in a facility, beatings, torture, forced confessions, threats to family and other loved ones, and so on. More often than not, the violence is government-sponsored, and worse yet, meets with the approval of a vocal segment of the population. Violence against women can just as easily be perpetrated by women within the society in an enforcement of patriarchal norms as by men. A significant risk is incurred by those choosing to raise awareness of or protest against such religious mandates. Just as the international community's mirror can serve as a reflector, women within these countries under strict religious mandates can become the directors of grass-roots campaigns amplified by that very same lens. Social media platforms and data encryption have become incredibly effective weapons utilized by the younger generations living under repressive regimes against those same regimes.

With those tools, for example, a new generation of young women in Iran have again stirred international outrage against the actions of their government and its so-called "morality police". Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran ushered in a strictly enforced adherence to modesty-focused modes of dress, women in Iran have been expected to wear a headscarf, or hijab, when in public or in the company of men who are not related to them. A spontaneous protest by the women of Iran arose around International Women's Day in 1979, only to be met by violent counter-protestors; both men and women participated in the quelling of the

International Women’s Day protest, and the government embarked on an agenda of aggressive Islamization of society. Very quickly thereafter, women were barred from holding important positions of authority such as judgeships, limited in their opportunities for education, and placed under a regressive standard of dress. As a result of the swift retribution by government authorities and conservative members of the community, a massive Iranian diaspora occurred. In countries with an appreciable Iranian population, there is significant political and social pressure placed on governments to intervene on behalf of those still under the religious yoke. Still, not all followers of Islam share the same views on the wearing of the hijab. There are those who welcome the hijab as an affirmation of faith and the commitment to modesty; to them, the hijab is a choice, not a compulsion. Though they may condemn the violence perpetrated against women, they do not necessarily attribute modesty dress-codes as a form of human rights abuse. Accordingly, UN Women aims to attain a balance between protecting women, ensuring equal rights, and adhering to religious regulations.

These ongoing debates have recently received an influx of attention as the situation for women in Iran has again been brought to light across the globe. For many young Iranian women, the hijab as a symbol of the Islamic faith is not in their interest to follow or is simply not practical for the activities they wish to participate in (e.g.: sports, modern dance, and so on). As a result of their unwanted government restrictions, many women are protesting against this dress code by refusing to wear the hijab. Some have even been so bold as to dislodge the religious symbolic headwear of authority worn by elder clerics. It is here where the current issue regarding violence arises. Specifically, in Iran, women are removing their hijabs and publicly cutting their hair in protest. Iranian officials have escalated the situation by using violence to control the outbreak. In response to the outbreak of protestors, many human rights cases of abuse have come from the enforcement of laws via a concept known as “morality policing.” Amnesty International reports that the “morality” police routinely subject women and girls to include arbitrary detention, torture, and other ill-treatment for not complying with Iran’s veiling laws or for publicly condemning them. On September 16, 2022, a young woman by the name of Masha Amini was detained by the police under unclear circumstances. It was reported that it was due to a violation of the hijab dress code. Shortly after, her death was confirmed by officials, and protests started in Iran. According to Amini’s cousin, her death was as a result of torture enduring during her detainment and transportation in a van, as well as at the morality police office. A blow to the head caused her to fall into a coma and ultimately succumb to cardiac arrest. The death of Masha Amini is just one of the many reasons that the UN aims to stop the violent enforcement of dress code laws.

The use of “morality policing” occurs in a number of prominent, highly religious countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Malaysia. In addition to this unwelcome moral monitoring, UN Women understands that preventing a woman from dressing in a way that has a personal religious connotation is also a grave human rights violation. France’s policy of banning head coverings such as the hijab/niqab is an area of concern that the UN aims to prevent whilst also ensuring the preservation of a women's right to dress as her will dictates. It is crucial that women choosing to adorn themselves in the hijab/niqab are not disenfranchised. A balance must be struck between the two extremes.

Freedom of choice for women’s clothing has always been a topic met with resistance in countries with strict enforcement of patriarchal standards of behavior. In the same vein, it is worth noting that many women wear a hijab or other religious garments as a sign of their faith. This is not the heart of the issue that this committee wishes to focus on, as religious garments chosen by an individual, of their own volition, and worn to show one’s faith are not inherently oppressive. As protests regarding dress codes across the world have been

met with state-sponsored violence, the UN Women recognizes the urgency in discussing and implementing solutions for these dangerous situations and aims to respond to the solutions concerning the police brutality that derives from these dress codes.

### **Section III—UN Involvement**

In the beginning, the United Nations publicly condemned the “violent crackdown” on the recent dress code-related uprising in Iran but has done little in the way of creating peace for these endangered women. Shortly after, the United Nations publicly condemned the Iranian forces for using violence against peaceful protestors. In addition to this, the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) removed the country from its term. Investigations on police brutality in these situations were launched starting in November 2022.

The United Nations has organized police training for women in several countries for the purposes of encouraging female officers to report cases of violence and in turn, decrease the mistreatment of women by male peers. Training programs like these can empower those within the ranks of authority to self-regulate the most overzealous elements of their society.

Because the police are the main response team to these dress code violations, police brutality must also be acknowledged. In a statement, experts within the United Nations acknowledged that most incidents of police brutality are rooted in political, socio-economic, ethnic, racial, religious, or other tensions. The United Nations already works towards dismantling these tensions via resolutions condemning police brutality. For example, in 2020, a resolution was passed that mandated that the UN High Commissioner investigate cases of police brutality among UN members. However, such efforts have so far proven futile as action has yet to be taken on police brutality.

### **Section IV—Possible Solutions**

The previous actions proposed above have been a passive response to this significant issue. Aside from publicly acknowledging the situation, little progress has actually been made to support women treated unjustly by these dress code enforcement means. The most significant issue that must be addressed is the resulting violence in response to peaceful demonstrations against the dress codes. If these countries’ violence can be stopped, then further action to rework dress code policies may be considered. One must also tread with caution, keeping in mind the need to respect each country’s policy and sovereignty.

Regarding the safety of female protesters, it would be effective to deploy the UN Peacekeeping Task Force to prevent government authorities from committing human rights violations. When situations arise that could take a violent turn, it would be beneficial to dispatch Peacekeepers. This solution could be a long-term commitment as the Peace Keeping forces stay in the respective country until law enforcement agencies and dress code restrictions are dismantled.

It is a common theme throughout the United Nations to focus on the collaboration of nations that have their own unique resources and rights. Neighboring countries can collaborate with others in order to provide support to women affected by mandatory dress codes. This includes education regarding the impact of mandatory dress codes and resources to provide further protection to protesters. In this particular case, as delegates are discussing, it is encouraged that nations work together to better each other’s government in terms of human rights.

## Section V—Bloc Positions

African: In the African Bloc, gendered social norms subject women to following strict dress codes. Threats of violence and harassment force women to comply with these dress codes and dress modestly. Notably, Uganda has several laws regarding dress codes, including restrictions on workplace attire. Many of these dress codes are the lasting remnants of colonization and foreign influence from other blocs. At their historical core, African countries valued expression and cared little about modesty and female restrictions. As laws have evolved and other countries have influenced their ways, these regulations for women have been incredibly extreme, especially for dress codes.

Asia-Pacific: Countries within the Asia-Pacific Bloc have little incentive to change their faith-based legal systems. Regions that have had a religion-based legal system from the start have a strict dress code for their women. Several countries, such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, enforce these dress codes for the sake of faith in the country's policy. The issue in both of these countries is when the opposition can lead to death. In response to peaceful protests, governments often use violence to carry out numerous cases of human rights abuse.

Eastern European: Countries in the Eastern European Bloc largely follow modest dress codes as a public standard, while those who disregard it face harassment, imprisonment, and hard labor. Often, this action is undertaken as a response to perceived challenges to religious institutions. For example, in Russia in 2012, three members of a feminist punk rock / performance art group were arrested and put on trial for an event they staged within an Orthodox Russian Church. Two were sentenced to years of hard labor in penal colonies because they had challenged what was held as acceptable within a house of worship. Other countries have a more relaxed dress code with little to no specifics regarding women's dress rights. Eastern European blocs are largely influenced by the Catholic Church as well as by various orthodox tenets of faith.

Latin American and Caribbean: In the Latin American and Caribbean Bloc, informal, extralegal dress codes prohibit women from certain clothing, such as sleeveless shirts. Similar to the Asia-Pacific and African bloc, Latin American regions originated with high respect and idolization for female expression; they later were influenced by colonization and the evolution of social norms that occurred as a result. These countries now hold strict dress codes that limit the amount of uncovered skin women can display. Little progress has been made in ending these informal dress codes and in eliminating societal standards for these regulations.

Western European and Others: The majority of the countries within West Europe and others lack regulations or laws regarding religious-based dress codes and work towards ending discriminatory practices. Despite this, France and Belgium have placed bans and restrictions on women wearing hijabs. These are the prime countries in which one would find dress code laws for women. The banning of these religious garments is an incredibly divisive issue that continues to be hotly debated. Women in France routinely will face Islamophobia and harassment for being seen wearing a hijab.

## Section VI—Questions That Should Be Taken Into Consideration

How can we ensure the country's policy is still respected while also ensuring violence does not take place?

What are some ways that police brutality has been dealt with in the past?

How can governments be incentivized to follow the international obligations and laws protecting women's rights?

Why is there a lack of international response to countries violating women's dress rights?

## Section VI—Helpful Sites and Resources

Human Rights Watch—Article—France: Face-Veil Ruling Undermines Rights

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN01](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN01) (Shortened URL from hrw.org)

France: Banning the Niqab Violated Two Muslim Women's Freedom of Religion - UN Experts

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN02](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN02) (Shortened URL from ohchr.org)

Amnesty International—Article—Iran: Death Penalty Sought in Sham Trials

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN03](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN03) (Shortened URL from amnesty.org)

Pew Research Center—Article—Women in many countries face harassment for clothing deemed too religious – or too secular

[pewrsr.ch/3JGGw0l](https://pewrsr.ch/3JGGw0l) (Shortened URL from pewresearch.org)

JSTOR Daily—Article—Muslim Women and the Politics of the Headscarf

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN04](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN04) (Shortened URL from jstor.org)

Human Rights Watch—Report—Iran Events of 2020

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN05](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN05) (Shortened URL from hrw.org)

UN Women—Statement—UN Women Statement on Women's Rights in Iran

[bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN06](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2023-UNWOMEN06) (Shortened URL from unwomen.org)

NPR—Article—In Iran, Women are Protesting the Hijab. In India, They're Suing to Wear It.

[n.pr/3YaC0ft](https://n.pr/3YaC0ft) (Shortened URL from npr.org)

**Potential Search Terms:** Iranian Morality Police, Iran Hijab protests, Police brutality, Dress code restrictions, Morality Police human rights abuses, Anti-Hijab laws in Europe