

# Vigilante Violence

THE ACID ATTACKS AGAINST WOMEN IN IRAN AND  
THE STATE'S ASSAULT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN

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A Briefing Paper

March 2015

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN

[www.iranhumanrights.org](http://www.iranhumanrights.org)

## About Us

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The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights in Iran.

The Campaign investigates and documents rights violations occurring throughout Iran, relying on first-hand accounts to expose abuses that would otherwise go unreported. We bring these violations to the attention of the international community through news articles, briefings, in-depth reports, podcasts, and videos, and work to build support for human rights inside Iran as well. The Campaign engages in intensive outreach and international advocacy aimed at defending the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Iranian people and holding the Iranian government accountable to its human rights obligations.

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## Executive Summary

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In 2014, a series of acid attacks against women in the Iranian city of Isfahan convulsed the nation. The assaults involved unidentified men flinging acid into the faces of women with whom they had no history of personal grudges. At least 14 attacks have been reported, and eyewitnesses have stated the assailants proclaimed they were defending hijab (Islamic female dress) during the attacks. No one has been charged in any of the assaults. This Briefing Paper by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran argues that these attacks have not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, they have taken place in the context of state policies, Parliamentary legislation, and official pronouncements by high-level state officials and government-affiliated clerics that have created a climate conducive to such violence. Pending bills such as the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice not only mandate ultraconservative notions of female dress and behavior for all Iranian women, but also call for citizen enforcement of the Plan, explicitly naming the Revolutionary Guard's Basij militias as the enforcers of proper hijab. Hardline officials justify such policies not only on ideological grounds, but also on the basis of national security imperatives, in which hijab is a bellwether issue reflecting their hold on power. Yet these policies have encouraged vigilante violence by radical groups who are now empowered to address "violators," creating fertile ground for the acid attacks. This Briefing Paper details the pending legislation, state initiatives, and official statements that have not only violated the rights of Iranian women, but have also profoundly endangered their continued safety. It presents a series of recommendations to the authorities in Iran aimed at preventing further violence against women in Iran.

## Recommendations

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### To the Iranian Parliament:

1. Immediately halt any further consideration of the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice and permanently withdraw the bill.
2. Modify all other pending legislation related to women's employment, higher education, and family planning to ensure that they do not discriminate against women in any manner and that they conform to Iran's international obligations regarding the rights of women.
3. Engage with women's organizations and civil society activists in the modification of this legislation, ensuring that the laws incorporate the demands raised by women's rights advocates.
4. Investigate all practices and actions conducted by other institutions such as the police and Basij that have unlawfully violated women's rights and increased the risk of violence against women.

### To the Iranian Judiciary and law enforcement agencies:

1. Aggressively pursue the identification and apprehension of the perpetrators of the acid attacks in a transparent manner and regularly update the public on the status of the investigations.
2. Forcefully prosecute any perpetrators charged to the full extent of the law, sending a clear message that such attacks will not be tolerated.
3. Decriminalize media reporting on the acid attacks, and lift all restrictions on the independent reporting and investigation of incidents of violence against women, allowing an environment in which such issues are freely and publicly discussed.

### To the Rouhani administration:

1. Use the full authority of the administration to counter the rise of violence against women by holding all arms of government accountable, and publicly denouncing and challenging the policies, legislation, and official pronouncements that have created fertile ground for such violence.
2. Use the president's authority over the Ministry of Interior, which controls the national police force, to ensure the public security and safety of women, ensure that the public is regularly updated on the status of the investigations into the acid attacks, ensure that the investigations are conducted in a transparent manner, and provide a safe environment for reporters to independently and freely investigate such attacks.

3. Empower and engage women's rights and civil society groups in the formulation of policies affecting women, and support and facilitate the activities and programs conducted or initiated by Iranian civil society and women's rights organizations that are focused on the elimination of violence against women in society.
4. Use the president's authority over the Ministry of Science to end all gender-based quotas and admission policies in higher education.

**To the international community:**

1. Communicate to the Government of Iran that Iran's full international rehabilitation and reintegration will be contingent upon Iran's respect for its international obligations regarding women's rights.
2. Communicate to the Government of Iran that Iran, as a member of the Commission on the Status of Women, should immediately and without reservation ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
3. Call on the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women to open an inquiry into the rise of violence against women in Iran.
4. Countries that engage in bilateral human rights dialogue with Iran, such as Brazil, Denmark, Japan and Switzerland, should put special focus in their dialogue with Iran on women's rights issues, and express direct concern to the Government of Iran regarding pending Parliamentary legislation and policies that adversely affect the safety of women.
5. The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) should renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran in order to ensure a continuous mechanism to monitor and report on women's rights in Iran.

## Introduction

In 2014, a series of acid attacks on women in public places occurred in the Iranian city of Isfahan. The attacks involved unidentified men flinging acid into the faces of young women, who were usually sitting in cars. In a number of the attacks, eyewitnesses reported the assailants proclaimed they were confronting improper hijab (Islamic dress for woman) as they flung the acid.<sup>1</sup>

Four attacks have been officially acknowledged, but early reports in local news sources, before the authorities discouraged media attention to the issue, indicated 14 attacks had occurred. Unconfirmed reports have asserted that additional attacks have taken place, with some putting the number as high as 18 to 20. The attacks, which were first reported by ISNA (the Islamic Student News Agency) on October 16, 2014 but actually began several weeks earlier, have resulted in at least one (reported) death, and egregious injuries to the rest of the women.

No one has been identified or charged in any of the attacks. There have, however, been several public protests regarding the attacks and the lack of concerted judicial attention to the crimes, and individuals participating in these peaceful protests have been arrested. A peaceful gathering in front of the Iranian Parliament on October 22, 2014, ended with the beating and arrest of several of the protesters by security agents. Among those arrested was the women's rights activist Mahdieh Golroo,<sup>2</sup> who was taken into custody on October 23, 2014, the day after she attended the Tehran gathering. She was held for three months, without public charge, until her release on bail on January 27, 2015. A peaceful gathering outside the Iranian Judiciary building in Isfahan, also on October 22, ended when plainclothes agents used batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd.<sup>3</sup> The day after the Isfahan protest, security agents arrested a photographer and two editors who had been covering the gathering for ISNA, which had been one of the major news outlets reporting on the attacks. While the two editors were released the next day, the photographer was held until October 31, when she was released on bail.



Narges Mohammadi, prominent women's and human rights defender.

These attacks have not taken place in a vacuum. Nor are they a series of isolated incidents. Rather, as this Briefing Paper by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran shows, they have come in the midst of state legislation that has sought to mandate ultraconservative notions of women's attire and behavior (with particular attention to strict adherence to "proper" hijab), public statements by state officials and leading government-affiliated clerics that have sought to portray defense of these policies as an Islamic duty, and the explicit designation of paramilitary organizations to enforce such policies. Indeed, one of the proposed pieces of legislation concerning women, the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, specifically designates the Basij (a volunteer paramilitary force under the supervision of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards which is used to enforce the regime's ideological dictates) to enforce the Plan.

Women's rights have been under assault in other ways as well, as a number of additional state initiatives that seek to curtail women's participation in the public sphere are making their way through Parliament and other areas controlled by the state. These initiatives, which limit women's employment and access to reproductive health and family planning, and promote gender-based university admissions, profoundly restrict women's ability to function fully and equally in public life. All have been forcefully justified by their proponents on ideological grounds.

Taken together, this has created a climate of state-sanctioned ideological intolerance that has set the stage for violence, in which vigilante groups take matters into their own hands to defend such policies and address "violations." As the human and women's rights defender Narges Mohammadi asserted, "Plans such as the 'Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice' and the 'Plan to Protect Chastity and Hijab' have issues and vocabulary that may be abused in the Iranian society and turned into excuses for violence [against women]."<sup>4</sup>

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**Any legislation that calls for the extra-judicial enforcement of "virtue" puts every woman in Iran at continued risk of violent assaults.**

Despite the series of assaults, the authorities have focused on silencing media coverage of the attacks, rather than identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators. The arrests of journalists reporting on the attacks have had a chilling effect on news coverage of the issue, effectively ending independent news reporting and limiting information on the attacks to official utterances.

The lack of judicial attention to violent assaults against women sends a message that such crimes are not real crimes at all, but rather defensible, even if misguided, actions taken by individuals in the name of Islam. It suggests that the intimidation of women and the imposition of hardline ideological proclivities are the real priorities, and ones that takes precedence over law enforcement and justice. This is a position that calls into serious question the Islamic Republic's claim that it is a country governed by the rule of law. Unless state officials make it clear that any citizen who takes it upon himself to enforce female dress codes is acting illegally and will be punished to the full extent of the law, the likelihood of more attacks is a clear and present danger. Moreover, any legislation that calls for the extra-judicial enforcement of "virtue" puts every woman in Iran at continued risk of violent assaults, and as such should be immediately withdrawn. Such legislation is not only an violation of Iranian and international law, it is a direct threat to the lives of Iranian women.

## The Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice

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Since the election in June 2013 of President Hassan Rouhani, who campaigned on a platform that included the promotion of women's rights, the Iranian Parliament has moved forward on a number of pieces of legislation that seek to impose ultraconservative notions of female piety on the population. The most far-reaching of these is the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice.

In June 2014, Iranian MPs took up for consideration the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice.<sup>5</sup> It calls for all citizens to take it upon themselves to promote "virtue" and prevent "vice" by "heart, verbal, written, and practical action." The Plan is startlingly vague in its delineation and expansive in its scope: it requires any action, and forbids any inaction, regarding the implementation of Shari'a law. It "invites" and in fact "forces" the citizenry to promote "virtuous acts" and prevent "forbidden" ones.

The one behavior the plan singles out as an example of the “virtue” that must be promoted is female adherence to correct hijab. Article 17, which requires the establishment of a Committee responsible for implementing the Plan, is followed by Note 1, which states: “The Committee is obligated to follow up on implementing regulations adopted by the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council regarding hijab and chastity.”

While Article 5 forbids the violation of the “life, property, residence, workplace or private space of others unless a judicial authority allows it,” an Amendment to this article states, “Areas that are in plain view of the public, such as some parts of apartments, hotels, hospitals, and vehicles, are not considered private.” No less than four of the Plan’s articles—Articles 6, 7, 8, and 10—explicitly call for the judicial protection of enforcers of the Plan. Yet there is no similar provision for the protection of the targets of such enforcement.

The subjectivity of such legislation, and the imposition of an extremely conservative social and cultural world view on all citizens of Iran would be enough cause for concern, but most troubling is the Plan’s explicit designation of the Basij for the enforcement of the Plan. The Plan states: “The Basij Organization is required to employ all Basij members within the framework of the communicated policies of the Supreme Council to establish the culture and to implement Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in the verbal stage.” An Amendment explicitly states: “This article does not deny the judicial responsibility of Basij members to take actions toward implementation.” A number of high-level clerics have publicly stated that effective enforcement must in fact go beyond verbal warnings.<sup>6</sup> (See the Official Statements on Women section of this Briefing.) This aspect of the bill effectively entrusts law enforcement to untrained (and unaccountable) individual citizens—in other words, it creates a system of vigilante justice.

Although the Plan has not yet reached full and final approval, it continues to advance through the legislative process. After review in a joint committee comprised of the Parliament’s Cultural Committee and the Judicial Committee, the Plan was passed by the committee, but it has not yet been voted on in the general floor of Parliament. On January 3, 2015, the Guardian Council announced that they had several objections to aspects of the Plan they viewed as ambiguous and sent it back to Parliament.<sup>7</sup> On January 11, a member of the Cultural Committee announced that the joint committee had been meeting with members of the Guardian Council to address their objections to the Plan and were working on revisions that would allow it to be brought to the floor of Parliament for a vote in the near future.<sup>8</sup> As of February 3, the Plan moved back to the full floor of Parliament and the MPs began voting on the various articles of the bill; several of them have been approved.<sup>9</sup>



*Mahdieh Golrou, a prominent activist, was arrested at a peaceful protest against the acid attacks in Iran.*

## The Emergence of Vigilante Groups

The designation of the Basij as the principal enforcers of the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice formalized the role of vigilante groups that had in fact already become active in the run-up to the legislation. Indeed, the movement to propel rigid public enforcement of strictly conservative notions of Islamic female piety has long been led by a vigilante group—the militant Islamic group Ansar-e Hezbollah (or Nation of Hezbollah).



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Ansar-e Hezbollah forces on their motorcycles in Tehran's Shahrak-e Ghods neighborhood in July 2014.

Semi-official in that it is protected by senior officials and clerics of the Islamic Republic, Ansar-e Hezbollah is not formally part of the state apparatus. It has a history of violent enforcement of hardline ideological predilections, especially against peaceful protesters (as in the 1999 student protests and the 2009 post-presidential election protests) and against women whom it considers to be in violation of Islamic female dress codes. After Rouhani's election, there were fears that they would reappear, just as they had during the (1997–2005) era known as the reformist period under then-President Khatami, when hardliners felt they had to re-assert themselves.

Early in 2014, prior to the onset of these legislative initiatives and public statements, Ya Lesarat, the official Ansar-e Hezbollah publication, issued a statement in April that indicated the group was gearing up to re-assert conservative values:

*"The Nation of Hezbollah is practicing a period of patience. However, since the Supreme Leader has stressed that revolutionary forces who object to the current situation should be present in this battlefield,*

*other volunteer groups have formed to make up for the silence that has been imposed on us.”<sup>10</sup>*

A few days later, on April 29, Mojtaba Rahmandoost, the MP who drafted the Promotion of Virtue bill, delivered a speech during a weekly Ansar-e Hezbollah meeting, that reflected the group’s role in pushing forward legislation on the issue. Rahmandoost stressed,

*“Promoting virtue and preventing vice should become a more popular practice. When have we seen people come to the streets (to protest) problems with (lack) of chastity and hijab? I’m not denying the responsibility of the government. Officials too must do their duty. I do not wish to talk about what I have done, but recently at Parliament’s Social Affairs Committee, we formed a chastity and hijab commission and invited the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Welfare, and Chastity and Hijab Foundation to participate. We are about to take some steps but they won’t be enough to solve the problem.”<sup>11</sup>*

Indicating growing public confidence, Ansar-e Hezbollah sent its forces onto the streets, to Fatemi Square in Tehran, on May 7, 2014, in the group’s first demonstration against women’s alleged non-conformity with hijab. The protesters did not have a permit, a requirement in practice in Iran, but it was held nonetheless. ANA news agency reported, “Even though Tehran Governor’s Office announced that they had not issued a permit for a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior, more than a thousand people gathered in the west wing of Fatemi Square and chanted slogans.

Later, the protesters began walking towards Vali Asr Square.” The report added, “The presence of police was unnoticeable. However, Hossein Allah-Karam, a member of the group known as Ansar-e Hezbollah was present and talked to Tehran Police Chief Sajedinia.” According to ANA, some of the chants included, “Men! Where is your wife’s hijab? And Men! Where is your manhood?”<sup>12</sup>

The Judiciary’s spokesperson, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, publicly defended the protest, stating on May 19, “We have to ask whether the Judiciary, the police, the Ministry of Guidance, and other bodies have been successful in this regard or not? Has the prosecutor, as the public defender, been able to act to protect the hijab in every province? If we respond (properly) to these kinds of concerns, there will be no need for people to demonstrate.”<sup>13</sup>

On May 20, 2014, Ansar-e Hezbollah’s website asserted, “We must stress that the era of ineffective protests are over; the kind of protests that only further provoked our enemies and norm-breakers. What is needed now is for Hezbollah to enter this fight and directly deal with these violators.”<sup>14</sup>

That month on its official website the group issued a statement titled, “Hezbollah’s Countdown for Ending Nudity and Lack of Hijab” which asserted: “(Hezbollah forces) have come to warn that they are preparing for a widespread operation to end nudity and lack of hijab. We are issuing this warning due to the fact that the problem of (lack of conformity with) the hijab in public places has become worse and anti-revolutionaries have intensified their recent operation to officially get rid of the hijab.”<sup>15</sup>

On July 3, 2014, Ansar-e Hezbollah reported that it had begun taking action. The group’s official website stated, “On June 22, the first motorcycle patrol unit for promoting virtue and preventing vice [was] dispatched to the streets of Tehran.”<sup>16</sup>

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**“What is needed now is for Hezbollah to enter this fight and directly deal with these violators.”**

—from Ansar-e Hezbollah’s official website on May 20 2014.

After the announcement, Ansar-e Hezbollah's motorcycle patrol units were heavily reported on in the Iranian press. Ministry of Interior officials, who report directly to Rouhani, warned that the group must apply for legal permits before taking any action<sup>17</sup>, but Ansar-e Hezbollah replied that they "see no reason to apply for a permit [from the Ministry of Interior] for the possibility of engaging in promoting virtue and preventing vice." The group added, "Our dear brothers in the police forces have been informed and we will continue to cooperate with them."<sup>18</sup>

On June 24, 2014, even as Interior Ministry officials demanded that the group stop their lawless actions, Hezbollah's operational commander was quoted on the group's website stating that the motorcycle patrols would continue. "Thirty-five years since the Islamic Revolution, the people who do not comply with proper hijab consider nudity and corruption as civil rights. They see devout Muslims' demand for conformity with Islamic and legal requirements as an intrusion in their privacy." He stressed, "The current unrestrained situation of nudity and lack of conformity with hijab is the direct result of Hezbollah's weak presence on the scene."<sup>19</sup>

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**It is critical to understand that Ansar-e Hezbollah and the Basij militias are, for all intents and purposes, the same.**

clear. They are promoting a way of thinking. When the people show their opposition to religion and tradition through their manners and behavior, they want to say society belongs to them and even the government should belong to them."<sup>20</sup>

On September 30, 2014, Hojjatoleslam Seyed Morteza Hosseini, a Member of Parliament's Social Affairs Committee, said to Ansar-e Hezbollah members in their weekly meeting, "The Supreme Leader talked about some important issues during a speech last year for the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council. The Supreme Leader said, 'I am sincerely concerned about our cultural problems. I'm truly worried. These are the kind of concerns that could wake a person up in the middle of the night and lead him to plead to God. I have these concerns but I cannot talk about them publicly. One of my fears is that the enemy has attacked our youths' faith.'" Morteza Hosseini added, "The Supreme Leader does not believe we should go to the gatherings of bums and trash to promote virtue and prevent vice. Such an act would be a threat to your life. Promoting virtue is a duty. Even if some don't comply with their duty, others are still responsible. Once a reporter told me Ansar-e Hezbollah is trying to act in a collective way to promote virtue and prevent vice. I responded that, 'Ansar-e Hezbollah is doing its religious duty within a legal framework, which is nothing new.'"<sup>21</sup>

A few days later, on October 7, 2014, Parliament agreed to vote on the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice.

Thus the national discussion regarding the need to implement a "promotion of virtue" and "prevention of vice" initiative seems to have been propelled forward largely by Ansar-e Hezbollah. Parliament, hardline clerics, and others in the conservative establishment effectively played catch up, transforming directives by this shadowy, unofficial group into state policy through Parliamentary legislation and official public pronouncements.

Re-asserting the long touted connection between improper hijab and enemies of the state, Hojjatoleslam Ghaem-Maghami, a cleric associated with Ansar-e Hezbollah, delivered a speech at an Ansar-e Hezbollah meeting on September 13, 2014, in which he stated, "When a woman does not comply with the hijab, even though it would be a sin, she could do so in her own home. But why does she insist on her non-conformity in public? The answer is very

The explicit designation of the Basij as the enforcers of the Plan to Promote Virtue is testament to the role of Ansar-e Hezbollah. It is critical to understand that Ansar-e Hezbollah and the Basij militias are, for all intents and purposes, the same. Ansar-e Hezbollah may be unofficial, and the Basij the official paramilitary force of the Revolutionary Guards, but the members of the two groups are largely the same, and Ansar-e Hezbollah is controlled by former and current Basij members. Thus the Promotion of Virtue Plan's designation of the Basij as the principal enforcers of the Plan not only ensured implementation of Ansar-e Hezbollah's policies, it also ensured that their own members, through the Basij militia, would be the officially legitimized and state-sanctioned vehicles of enforcement. The acid attacks against the young women in Isfahan are the results of such policies.

## Interviews with Attack Victims and Their Families

Prior to the state clampdown on media coverage of the acid attacks (which included the arrest of photographers and editors covering peaceful gatherings meant to draw attention to the attacks and the lack of any arrests in the cases), there was a significant amount of reporting by local and national Iranian news agencies on the attacks. This coverage included interviews with victims, family members of victims, and eyewitnesses to the attacks, many of whom relayed extensive details about the attacks in the hope of aiding local law enforcement efforts. The following excerpts are drawn from these accounts.

On October 18, 2014, ISNA talked to the father of one of the acid attack victims, identified in that report as 27-year-old Neda M.

*"Neda stopped the car on the corner of the street to take a call from her mother. At this point, a motorcycle with two riders pulled up next to her and poured acid on her and took off. Now she is injured on her eyes, left ear, neck, arms and legs.... She had no personal grudges with anyone.... She has to undergo four operations, the doctors have given up completely on treating one of her eyes, and the other has a 20-30% chance of vision."<sup>22</sup>*

On October 18, 2014, ISNA talked with one of the acid attack victims, identified in that report as Maryam D.

*"I thank God that my son was not with me, because if he was in the passenger seat next to me, what would have happened to him? A motorcyclist poured nearly two liters of acid through the open window*



Front page of the Farhikhtegan newspaper featuring an article on one of the acid attacks in Isfahan in October 2014, before authorities shut down coverage of the issue.

*on my face, arms, legs, and my entire body. My clothes became powder inside my flesh. I lost one of my corneas and my body is severely disfigured. Part of my skull has a hole in it....That day I was wearing my university uniform.”<sup>23</sup>*

On October 19, 2014, Salamat News reported:

*“Today, at 11:00 a.m. on October 19, a motorcyclist with two passengers approached three women on Sheikh Sadoogh Street in Isfahan and threw acid on them. According to an eyewitness who spoke to the local media, one of the women, who had acid poured on her chest, died on the spot. The other two were transferred to hospital.... According to the latest tally, the number of women who have been victims of acid attacks has reached 14.”<sup>24</sup>*

## Official Statements on Women: State-Sanctioned Discrimination

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Hassan Rouhani’s election to the presidency in June 2013 triggered a backlash by hardline state officials and conservative clerics anxious to assert their dominance in the domestic sphere. Women’s issues, always dominant in the ideology of the Islamic Republic, assumed particular importance in this power struggle, and use of the bully pulpit to make strident public statements promoting a more restrictive view of women’s place in society increased palpably after Rouhani’s election.

**“The enemies of the state believe they can harm us through spreading bad hijab practices.”**

—Leading cleric Ayatollah Makkarem Shirazi on July 9, 2013

These statements were disseminated through the state-run media, Friday prayers, and official speeches throughout the country. They presented ultraconservative views on women and gender policies as mandated by (their interpretation of) Islam, as well as by an alleged national security imperative to guard against infiltration by the West, and, through their explicit references to the necessity of public enforcement of these views and policies, lay the groundwork for vigilante groups to take matters into their own hands.

On July 9, 2013, a leading cleric, Ayatollah Makkarem Shirazi, stated,

*“The issue of improper hijab has...become a political issue. The enemies of the state believe that they can harm us through spreading bad hijab practices. On the other hand, we believe if we deal with (and end) improper hijab we will strengthen the state....If we don’t protect hijab in society, we will harm the state. Anti-revolutionaries would use every opportunity to get rid of the hijab and harm us. Unlike what Westerners claim, the hijab should not be a choice. Protecting hijab is our moral and religious duty.”<sup>25</sup>*

On September 20, 2013, Ayatollah Jannati, the head of the Council of Guardians, stated during a Friday Prayer sermon,

*“We have passed the chastity and hijab law and don’t enforce it. We’ve told the President that he should start (addressing the issue) by enforcing proper hijab on those whose salaries we pay. Public*

**"The concept of gender equality is one of Western philosophy's biggest errors about women's issues."**

—Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on April 19, 2014



*employees should comply with proper Islamic hijab....Why do women take off their chadors and become ruined after getting accepted into universities?...If a student has a bad hijab, she should be banned and her grade should reflect her conduct.”<sup>26</sup>*

On September 22, 2013, Grand Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani in Qom, in a speech to Revolutionary Guard commanders said,

*“Getting rid of the hijab is the most significant way of diverting society (from the righteous path). You Guards are the protectors of our beloved Islam, and as such you must be in the forefront of promoting virtue and preventing vice.”<sup>27</sup>*

On November 22, 2013, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, said,

*“On occasions when immodest clothing is systematically used to destroy the Revolution’s image, as it was done during the 2009 riots by the direction of satellite channels [a reference to the peaceful citizen protests after the disputed 2009 presidential election in Iran], the issue of the hijab becomes a national security issue. In such cases, security institutions should comply with their responsibility and counter these systematic activities of anti-revolutionaries.” He added, “If cultural and social measures, and promoting virtue and preventing vice do not work, the police and judiciary should bring legal action. We need to address the issue [of] hijab comprehensively and with precision.”<sup>28</sup>*

On April 16, 2014, Grand Ayatollah Nouri-Hamedani, asserted in a lecture,

*“Today we see that in Tehran and big cities that nothing is done to promote virtue and prevent vice in regards to the hijab. In these areas, ladies wear scarves that don’t cover their hair. We must do what is necessary and promote virtue and prevent vice more often.”<sup>29</sup> In a speech a few days later he added, “One of the country’s biggest cultural issues*



Thousands outside the Judiciary building in Isfahan, on October 22, 2014, peacefully protest the acid attacks, until plainclothes agents dispersed the crowd with batons and tear gas.



*Bills violating the rights and endangering the safety of Iranian women continue to make their way through the hardline-dominated Iranian Parliament.*

*is the issue of chastity and hijab. Unfortunately, we are not dealing with it properly. The government must begin enforcing chastity and hijab in government offices and slowly spread this effort to other areas.”<sup>30</sup>*

Ayatollah Seyed Morteza Mahmoudi, Friday Prayer leader in Varamin, said on November 5, 2014,

*“If preventing vice and promoting virtue becomes a more widespread practice in society, certainly many of our problems will be solved.... In Varamin some volunteer groups have begun promoting virtue and preventing vice. When they see individuals who are not following Islamic norms, they go up to them and very nicely warn them. These groups’ actions on the streets and other public areas have been somewhat effective. If everyone joins this trend, we would see greater results.”<sup>31</sup>*

These statements, just a sampling of the many made by hardline officials and conservative clerics, have not only promoted an ultraconservative interpretation of Islamic piety, they have legitimatized and mandated public enforcement of this interpretation. This has led to the violent assaults on women by vigilante groups.

Hardliners who have sought to propel their vision of women’s proper role and place in society into the realm of law imposed on all Iranian women, have been empowered above all else by the unequivocal support they receive from Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. On April 19, 2014, he stated,

*“If we want to have a healthy, rational, and accurate view of women’s issues we must first rid ourselves from what Westerners say about women; statements about women’s employment, women’s leadership and gender equality. The concept of gender equality is one of Western philosophy’s biggest errors about women’s issues.”<sup>32</sup>*

## The Rouhani Administration

While there were expectations that the status of women would improve after Rouhani's victory, this has not proved to be the case. During his presidential campaign, Rouhani's remarks in support of women's rights were unequivocal: "Men and women are equal in the eyes of Islam and the Islamic Revolution," Rouhani said in a speech during his campaign at the Great Islamic Encyclopedia Center on May 1, 2013. "The next government will be the government of equal opportunity for men and women." He added, "Ignoring women's demands is in conflict with the logic of the Islamic Revolution."<sup>33</sup>

And in remarks with great future relevance to the subsequent acid attacks on women, Rouhani said in a speech on June 9, 2013, in the Grand Mosque in Sari, "In [my] government...no one will (be allowed to) violate women's rights in the name of Islam, because I will not be hiding behind the veil of religion and piety."<sup>34</sup>

Yet by and large the pledges Rouhani made during his campaign regarding women's rights have not been fulfilled, and discriminatory gender-based policies have continued to advance, if not accelerate. It remains an open question whether this is due to lack of will or ability, but explicit legislation calling for public enforcement of "virtue" represents a new level of assault against women in Iran. This unusual exchange of remarks by Rouhani and Khamenei reflects the growing intensity of the debate. On May 13, 2014, Khamenei stated,

*"Sometimes when there is talk of offering guidance and religious fact, some people say we are not responsible for sending people to heaven. Actually we are. This is the distinction between an Islamic theocracy and other types of governments. The Islamic ruler wants to act in a way that would deliver people to heaven; to the true and eternal happiness. We must pave the path (to paradise). We are not talking about forcing things and compelling people, but helping them. People intuitively seek salvation. We must clear the path and make getting to heaven easier for them. This is our duty."*<sup>35</sup>

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Rouhani said in a campaign speech on June 9, 2013, "In [my] government... no one will (be allowed to) violate women's rights in the name of Islam, because I will not be hiding behind the veil of religion and piety."

Soon after these remarks by Khamenei, Rouhani asserted on May 24,

*"We shouldn't intervene in people's lives so much, even if it's out of compassion. Let's allow people to find the path to paradise themselves. We cannot force people to heaven through force and lashing. Prophet [Mohammad] did not have a whip in hand. The Prophet made promises and gave warnings, and we must do the same. We must all work together to bring peace to society."*<sup>36</sup>

The conservative response to these remarks was immediate and unequivocal: Ahmad Khatami, a cleric and Friday prayer leader in Tehran stated on May 30, "Paving the path to paradise is (our) calling. That is why the government has a duty to pave the way to heaven for people."<sup>37</sup> On the same day, Ahmad Alamolhoda, the Friday Prayer leader in Mashhad, said, "Lashing is nothing! We'll use all that we have to stop those who prevent people's entry to heaven."<sup>38</sup> And the Head of the Iranian Judiciary, Sadegh Larijani, stated on June 12, "[Saying] we shouldn't force people into heaven comes from a modern-liberal way of thinking...Westerners believe governments should be neutral and should not play a role in determining [societal] values. Such a statement comes from this way of thinking."<sup>39</sup>

## Other State Initiatives

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In addition to the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, other state initiatives imposing ultraconservative views that significantly limit women's ability to participate in public life have been put forward as well. Most of these legislative actions were initiated under the previous Ahmadinejad administration, and none have yet fully become law, as there are still procedural steps that must be navigated.

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**These bills represent a concerted state-sanctioned assault on women's basic rights and freedoms.**

academic or other public realms; and she must adhere to conservative interpretations of Islamic attire and behavior in public. These legislative actions are in violation of international and Iranian laws prohibiting gender-based discrimination.

Nevertheless, increasingly strident efforts to transform hardline views on women into the law of the land reflect a systematic state effort to impose further restrictive and discriminatory policies onto Iranian women at large. The overriding policy imperative has been consistent: women's place is in the home; her role is of wife and mother; she should not participate fully in professional,

## THE PRESERVATION OF CHASTITY AND HIJAB PLAN

Currently under review in Parliament, is the Preservation of Chastity and Hijab Plan.<sup>40</sup> Introduced in October 2014, this bill is largely concerned with enforcing conservative Islamic dress for women in public, but also includes employment limitations for women.

As reported in the Etemad newspaper, if Parliament passes the plan, women police officers will warn "women who offend the public chastity with their inappropriate and un-Islamic hijab. These women will have to take educational classes (in public chastity) and pay between 200,000 to one million tomans (about \$60 to \$300) in fines."<sup>41</sup>

According to the Shargh newspaper, "Article Two refers to a section of administrative regulations, in which the improper hijab of government employees is addressed, and adds that those who violate this regulation will receive a written warning in their employment record. If their violation is repeated they will lose up to one third of their salary, overtime, and other pay for a period of one to twelve months."<sup>42</sup>

The plan also includes gender segregation initiatives and limitations on women's work hours. As reported in Etemad, the plan requires that "Women employed in retail should not mix with men. These women should work during conventional hours, meaning 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. If a retailer violates this provision it will be shut down for a week. If the violation is repeated, the business will be closed for one month."<sup>43</sup>

This bill is still under review in the Judicial Committee of the Parliament; it has not yet been approved or sent to the floor for a vote.

## THE COMPREHENSIVE POPULATION AND FAMILY PLAN

In May 2013, the Comprehensive Population and Family Plan was introduced into the Iranian Parliament.<sup>44</sup> The bill, which aims to encourage population growth, seeks to re-assert long-standing views held by conservatives in the Islamic Republic which hold that is against women's nature to work outside the home and that her primary role is to bear children. Proponents of these views believe women's employment weakens families and leads to an increased divorce rate and a plummeting population growth rate.

As Fatemeh Derakhshani, then-deputy Health Minister, stated in April 2013, "Until a few years ago the policy of the Health Ministry was reducing birth rates, but this has changed. Now we encourage every family to have more than two children. However, factors such as women's education and employment prevent population growth."<sup>45</sup>

An editorial, "Women's Employment and Damage to Family Foundation," published in January 2013 by the Fars News Agency, which is associated with the Revolutionary Guards, elaborated more fully on the conservative view of women's employment: "Because of society's liberal models, some believe that financial independence for women through employment, which requires them to play a male role, is more important than women's main roles....Ultimately this leads to a harmful way of raising children; the attachment between husband and wife is weakened and therefore, the family foundation is damaged."<sup>46</sup>



■ As Parliament moves forward with a bill restricting women's reproductive rights and access to family planning, a billboard in Tehran encourages Iranian women to have more children.

In accordance with this view, the Comprehensive Population and Family Plan explicitly legislates a preference for hiring male employees. Article Nine of the bill states, "In both public and private sectors,

the priority in hiring should be given to: males with children, married males without children, and females with children respectively. Single individuals may be hired if there are no qualified married applicants.” Note Two of Article Nine, incentivizes private sector compliance with the bill: “If this article is observed by a private sector employer for five years, the employer would be released of the 6% insurance payments for those employees who have been hired according to the said priorities. Instead, the government would cover the insurance cost. The government is obliged to cover the insurance cost from the date on which this bill goes into effect.”

The plan was discussed in Parliament in early August 2013, in the closing days of the Ahmadinejad administration. At that time, Zahra Sajjadi, who was an advisor to President Ahmadinejad and deputy head of the Center for Women and Family Affairs, said in an interview with Fars News Agency, “Because our religion states the man is the head of the family, men should be prioritized in hiring practices.”<sup>47</sup>

The incoming administration objected, with Rouhani’s vice president for Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi stating, “The President’s vice president for Women and Family Affairs opposes not prioritizing the employment of single women. The bill is under expert review and soon we will hand over our findings to the Majlis (Parliament).”<sup>48</sup> However, the bill has been passed by the Cultural Committee of Parliament and has been put in the agenda for a full Parliamentary vote. As of this writing it is unclear how the bill will fare. Parliament’s research arm, the Islamic Parliament Research Center, has criticized the bill, and the Rouhani administration is currently arguing that it does not have the funds needed to implement the Plan.<sup>49</sup>

## THE REDUCING WOMEN'S WORK HOURS BILL

In June 2013, the outgoing Ahmadinejad administration introduced the Reducing Women’s Work Hours Bill.<sup>50</sup> This bill mandates a reduction in hours women are allowed to work. Its proponents claim this is meant to increase the time women spend at home and with their children.

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**The Rouhani administration has publicly—even if tepidly—raised objections to many of these bills.... Yet hardliners dominate Parliament and the Guardian Council and, once approved by these two bodies, these bills will become law.**

In an interview on August 11, 2014, with Fars News Agency, Fatemeh Aliya, a conservative Member of Parliament, stated, “Currently women’s work week is 44 hours and it will be reduced to 36 hours. The bill states that women who have children younger than seven or spouses with health issues can [either] take one full day off or work a little less every day.”<sup>51</sup>

The bill’s effect on employment opportunities for women, given employers’ likely concerns about the limit on work hours, was noted by Shahindokht Molaverdi, Rouhani’s vice president for Women and Family Affairs, in an interview on September 13, 2013, with ISNA: “Passing bills such as Reducing Women’s Work Hours harms women’s employment opportunities in the short- and long-term.”<sup>52</sup>

The bill was debated in Parliament after Rouhani took office in August 2013, and was passed by the Social Affairs Committee of Parliament in late 2014. As of this writing it has not yet been sent to the floor of Parliament for a vote.

## THE PLAN TO INCREASE BIRTH RATE AND PREVENT POPULATION DECLINE

In April 2014, Parliament took up the Plan to Increase Birth Rate and Prevent Population Decline.<sup>53</sup> The Shargh newspaper reported that this bill banned abortion, vasectomy, and tubectomy, and punished the prevention of pregnancy by two to five years in prison.<sup>54</sup>

As the public outcry over the bill grew, Shahrvand newspaper reported on July 2, 2014, that some punishments contemplated in the bill might be removed. Shahrvand stated, "Media outlets widely reported Parliament's decision to eventually put the bill to vote. Since then MPs have faced much criticism. The Ministry of Health has said the bill is against civil rights and harms the health of mothers and infants. Also women's rights activists and sociologists have described the punishments unreasonable and said it could have the reverse effect. They all agree that people cannot be forced into doing something."<sup>55</sup>

Introduced in April 2014, the bill was sent to the Public Health Committee of Parliament, where it was passed in June 2014. It was then introduced on the floor of Parliament in July where it was approved and passed on for the required approval by the Guardian Council. The Council wanted certain articles changed, and sent the bill back to the Public Health Committee to address those issues. In August 2014, it was announced that the existing Plan had been shelved for undisclosed reasons, and that the Committee was working on more comprehensive legislation regarding this issue.

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[T]he specific call for citizen enforcement in the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice is effectively a state-sanctioned invitation to vigilante justice. Indeed, we have already seen this outcome with the acid attacks on women in Iran...."

## STATE-LEGISLATED DISCRIMINATION

Taken together, these bills represent a concerted state-sanctioned assault on women's basic rights and freedoms. More troubling, the specific call for citizen enforcement in the Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice is effectively a state-sanctioned invitation to vigilante justice. Indeed, we have already seen this outcome with the acid attacks on women in Iran, by unknown assailants who have proclaimed their duty to "protect virtue." None of these bills have yet become law. Yet they are making their way through the legislative process with the full backing of hardliners in the Parliament and in the clerical establishment. The Rouhani administration has publicly—even if tepidly—raised objections to many of these bills, and still has time to try to exert all possible pressure to influence the debate and prevent approval of the proposed bills. Yet hardliners dominate Parliament and the Guardian Council in both numbers and influence, and, once approved by these two bodies, these bills will become law.

## WOMEN'S EDUCATION

In addition to national legislation, the state has moved forward with other initiatives that restrict women's ability to participate in public life. Most notably, the state has promoted gender-based university admissions policies that are highly discriminatory to women.

Ironically, the Islamic Republic has long pointed to the expansion of women's education as one of its crowning achievements. Yet the success of female education in Iran, especially the expansion of women's university



**Female students are subjected to gender-based university admission quotas and restrictions on fields of study.**

political office and approves legislation passed by Parliament, said at Tehran Friday prayers in November 2008, “One of the problems women’s university education has caused for us is that when suitors seek their hand in marriage, perhaps the first question asked is his educational level....[Women] should know that they are destroying their own lives and the country will also face problems as a result of the increased marriage age,” he said. “Women’s university education has become problematic.”<sup>56</sup>

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**Hardliners have attacked the re-hiring and re-admittance of professors and students who had been banned for political reasons from studying at university under the previous administration, and have vehemently fought against the removal of gender-based admission quotas.**

In August 2012, a Mehr News Agency report found that women were now prevented from admission in 77 majors in 36 universities, including such areas as accounting, education, advising and counseling, historical restoration, chemistry, and engineering.<sup>57</sup> The Mehr report found that Mohaghegh Ardabili University had 24 majors restricted to men, Lorestan University had 18 majors, and the Imam Khomeini International University had 15 male-restricted majors. These three universities had the highest number of men-only majors. Civil Engineering and Topographical Survey, and two-year Civil Engineering majors comprised the largest men-only majors in 15 universities, followed by Management groups, and then Mine Engineering in 12 universities.

attendance, triggered a reactionary backlash that came to fruition under the (previous) hardline administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Conservative government officials and clerics came to view female education as a threat to traditional Islamic values, particularly regarding commitment to the family and willingness to marry and bear children. They linked university-level education and the professional opportunities it created to an increasing divorce rate and plummeting fertility rate. Restricting women’s access to areas of study in higher education thus became a policy priority.

As Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the Chairman of the Guardian Council, the body that vets candidates for

The primary means the Ahmadinejad administration used to promote gender-based admission policies was through the Ministry of Science, which installs the heads of universities. There are 76 government-affiliated universities in Iran whose heads are directly appointed by this ministry and thus chancellors who were willing to implement gender-based admissions policies were installed in universities throughout the country.

In an August 9, 2014 article on the issue, Etemad Newspaper wrote, "A review of the 2014 Entrance Exam booklet shows that Shiraz University [one of Iran's major universities] and Mohagheh Ardabili University are leaders in gender quotas. In almost all majors in the four humanities, physical science, math, and arts disciplines, these universities have implemented this [gender-quota] policy." The report continued, "Shiraz University has implemented gender quotas in 60 majors, increasing the quota for male admissions in 36 majors, doubling the male admission quotas in three majors, and equal quotas in 21 majors. In the two majors of Biosystem Mechanical Engineering and Islamic Theology, women were completely eliminated. Details of announced capacities indicate that Shiraz University has allocated a higher capacity for men in all the majors under the pilot group of Math Sciences and Technology. In its Biosystem Mechanical Engineering Major, this university has allocated its entire capacity of 20 to men, and in Statistics, Math, Physics, Electrical Engineering, Urban Planning, Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, Material Science Engineering, and Petroleum Engineering majors, it admitted almost twice as many men. In the Tourism Management major under its Mathematical and Technical Sciences sub-group, Shiraz University has allocated twice as many spots for women. In 40 of its majors, Mohaghegh Ardabili University has allocated double quotas for men."<sup>58</sup>

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During his campaign, Rouhani directly criticized the gender-based university admissions policies (as well as gender-based employment policies promoted by hardliners), stating, "They did not ask people's opinion. This is an unprofessional plan. In our constitution there is no mention of gender segregation....The next government will not discriminate between men and women who are seeking employment opportunities."<sup>59</sup>

Yet since coming into office, Rouhani has faced vehement hardline opposition to any rollback of gender-based quotas, and has not been able to enact significant change. "The Ministry of Science considers gender quotas in the University Entrance Examination admissions against educational justice. The Ministry of Science does not believe in general quotas in nationwide University Entrance Examination, and one of the new policies for the Ministry is to eliminate them," said Jafar Tofiqhi, Advisor to the Minister of Science in April 2014.<sup>60</sup> Yet he was forced to retract his statement the next day. "My statements yesterday about gender quotas in universities, were only my personal views and do not represent the Ministry of Science's views," he told ISNA.<sup>61</sup> "So far, gender quotas are not on the Ministry of Science's agenda. Decision-making about university gender quotas is a subject that will be put on the Science Ministry's agenda when necessary."<sup>62</sup>

While Rouhani has replaced 49 out of the 76 state-affiliated university heads with individuals in line with the administration's more centrist view on women, the universities have been under intense pressure to maintain conservative policies. Hardliners have attacked the re-hiring and re-admittance of professors and students who had been banned for political reasons from studying at university under the previous administration, and have vehemently fought against the removal of gender-based admission quotas. Rouhani's first four choices for the Minister of Science and Higher Education were not approved by Parliament; while his fifth choice was finally approved, he was impeached a few months later.

Drawing a direct connection between education and employment opportunities considered undesirable for women, Grand Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani, a leading cleric from Qom, said at a meeting with Payam-e Nour University Chancellor on April 25, 2014, "It is not necessary for all women to attend the university, because this will cause expectations in the employment field, as well."<sup>63</sup>

In a speech on April 19, 2014, Iran's Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, made it clear that gender-based university admissions were carried out with his full support: "There are some professions that are not commensurate with a woman's make, so they shouldn't pursue those. One thing to do is not to impose on women [an] education that leads to those jobs. On the issue of universities and education, some make a lot of noise about discrimination in education; such discrimination is not a bad thing everywhere...this discrimination is justice itself.... [Therefore,] based on those high goals, we must look to see what studies are suitable for women, and make those studies available to them. Just because she participated in the University Entrance Exam, or because she scored a certain score, we must not force her to study a certain major which may not be compatible with her feminine nature, nor compatible with her high goals, and where the jobs she will be offered as a result of these studies are not compatible with her."<sup>64</sup>

The ramifications of these quotas are significant. Women are banned from receiving the training that is required to enter numerous fields, thereby preventing them from employment in these areas. Their professional opportunities will be limited, in violation of Iranian and international laws that prevent discrimination on the basis of gender.

## Conclusion

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In a cabinet meeting on October 26, 2014, President Rouhani said, "The government will investigate these events [referring to the acid attacks] with all its capacity so that justice can be done with regards to the perpetrator[s] and so that [they] receive maximum punishment."<sup>65</sup> Yet months after these attacks, no perpetrators have been charged, despite extensive eyewitness details of accounts initially reported in the Iranian press. Moreover, Parliamentary legislation continues to move forward, and official pronouncements continue to be made at the highest level of state and among the clerical establishment, that are laying the groundwork for further attacks on women. The call for extra-judicial enforcement of state-mandated ultraconservative notions of female dress and behavior puts every woman in Iran at risk of violent assaults. This is not only an egregious violation of Iranian and international law, it is a direct threat to the lives of Iranian women. The Rouhani Administration must use all its powers and the bully pulpit to establish the rule of law in Iran. This means exhorting the Judiciary to pursue the perpetrators of these acid attacks, so that any future assailants know they will be met with the full force of the law. It means explicitly stating that vigilante justice, where citizens of any stripe can take it upon themselves to punish female "violators" is specifically forbidden under Iranian law—and will be punished. And it means immediately withdrawing legislation that mandates Basij enforcement of hijab or any other marker of female "virtue." For its part, the international community must also make clear to the Islamic Republic that if it is to achieve the full international rehabilitation and reintegration it seeks, these violations of the rights and safety of Iranian women must be immediately stopped.

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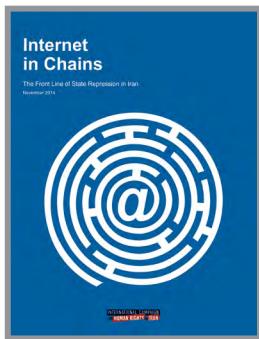
# Vigilante Violence

## THE ACID ATTACKS AGAINST WOMEN IN IRAN AND THE STATE'S ASSAULT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In 2014, a series of acid attacks against women occurred in the Iranian city of Isfahan. This Briefing Paper argues that these attacks have not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, they have taken place in the context of state policies that have mandated ultraconservative notions of female dress and behavior for all Iranian women, and called for their enforcement by Iran's Basij militias. These policies have encouraged vigilante violence by radical groups who are now empowered to address "violators," creating fertile ground for the acid attacks. This Campaign Briefing Paper details the Parliamentary legislation, especially the pending Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, pronouncements by state officials and clerics, and other state initiatives that together have not only violated the basic rights of Iranian women, but have endangered their safety as well.

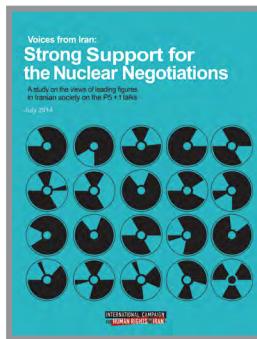
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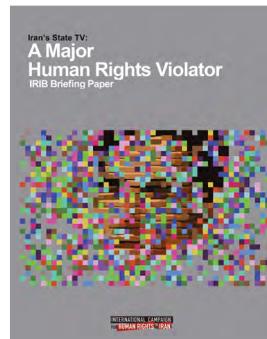
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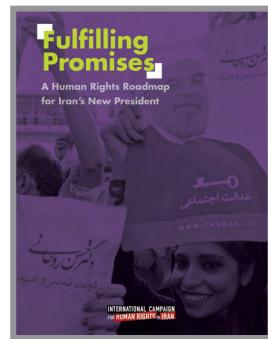
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