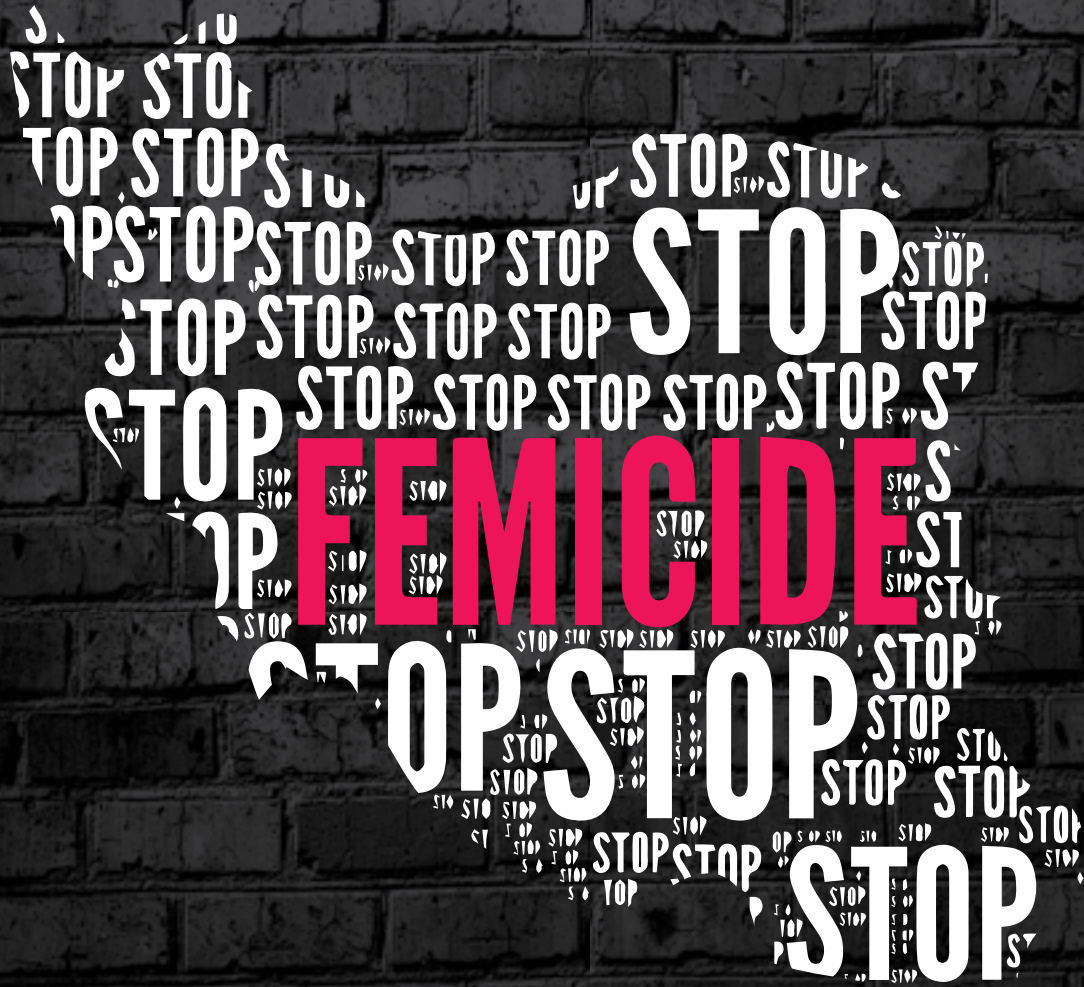


# 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

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# **DOCUMENTED FEMICIDES IN IRAN:**

## **AN ANALYSIS OF THEIR LOCATIONS, MODI OPERANDI, VICTIMS, AND PERPETRATORS**

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# Documented Femicides in Iran in 2022: An Analysis of their Locations, Modi Operandi, Victims, and Perpetrators

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2022, the case of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old woman who was arrested by Iran's morality policy for refusing to comply with headscarf regulations and eventually died in state custody, sparked protests for women's rights and socio-economic and political reforms across Iran and even attracted international attention. It is however rather the exception than the norm that a case of femicide, which is the killing of a woman or girl for their gender, gains this level of visibility. In most cases, femicides are committed by family members in the privacy of the home, and the victims disappear without any trace in public records. Their bodies are sometimes discovered in desolate areas of the country or buried in unmarked graves in remote cemeteries.

There are no accurate statistics about the number of femicide victims in Iran, but reports indicate that around 600 women and girls die in femicides every year. This is more than one killing every day. The actual number is likely to be higher due to underreporting by family members and law enforcement authorities. In addition, there are reports of hundreds of women and girls in Iran who commit suicide to spare their male family members from the consequences of carrying out a femicide. This level of violence against women and girls is not unique to Iran; worldwide there are over 50,000 femicides every year - or over 137 killings daily. However, women and girls in Iran are at a high risk of femicide considering that Iran has reportedly the highest level of domestic violence in the world, and many femicides are committed by male relatives or the spouses of the victim after domestic disputes. The existing numbers, albeit incomplete, indicate a lack of protection of women and girls in both the private and public spheres.

This report seeks to analyze the phenomenon of femicide in Iran by mapping patterns of locations, modi operandi, motives, and the identify of victims and perpetrators and proposing a set of recommendations for civil society, the Iranian Government, and international community. The report is produced by the Alliance for Rights of All Minorities (ARAM), a network of activists that seeks to promote human rights in Iran. It studies 191 cases of femicide that took place in 2022 and are recorded in the database of ARAM's initiative "StopFemicideIran" (SFI).

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## ABOUT STOPFEMICIDEIRAN

ARAM launched its SFI initiative in 2020 following the brutal killing of the 14-year-old Romina Ashrafi allegedly at the hands of her father. SFI seeks to combat the phenomenon of femicide in Iran and honor the victims, thereby adopting a three-prong approach to accomplish this mission:

**Documentation:** SFI monitors and records suspected cases of femicides based on publicly available information to identify patterns, conduct advocacy, and name the many victims who die nameless.

**Education:** SFI provides human rights activists and the wider society in Iran and abroad with detailed information about the phenomenon of femicide, its root causes, and methods to prevent and respond to it.

**Empowerment:** SFI enhances the capacity and competencies of grassroots civil society actors to advocate for the rights of women who are affected by femicide through cultural, religious, psychosocial, and legal tools and create new pathways for social and behavioral change.

In its first years of establishment, SFI has primarily focused on the documentation component of its work, recording and analyzing hundreds of femicide incidents to identify relevant patterns.

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## WHAT IS FEMICIDE?

While there is no internationally accepted definition, the term “femicide” is commonly used to describe the intentional killing of women and girls because of their gender. The most severe form of gender-based violence against women and girls, femicide requires the perpetrator to have a gender-related motive for the killing. Such motives may include the desire to exercise power over females or prevent or punish them for socially unacceptable female behavior, assumptions of entitlement and ownership over women and girls, pleasure, or sadistic desires towards females. Most femicides are committed by the victims’ husbands or male relatives in the privacy of the home. Femicides may however also occur in the public sphere and include different modi operandi and relationships between victims and perpetrators.

In the context of the Middle East, including Iran, a common form of femicide are so-called “honor killings,” which are defined as “crimes committed in the name of so-called honor. The perpetrators are typically male family members who – sometimes with the support of the matriarchs – kill another female family member for acts that allegedly go against societal traditions, wrongly interpreted religious demands, or the family’s reputation. Such acts may include perceived sexual or behavioral transgressions or cases of incest and rape.

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## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This report is based on femicide cases that took place in Iran in 2022 and are recorded in SFI's database. For this database, SFI relied on official sources of the Iranian Government, newspaper articles, and social media reports. SFI registered an incident of femicide in its database when it could identify at least three of the following indicators: data and place of the incident; name, age, and ethnicity of the victim; victim-perpetrator relationship; modus operandi of the killing; and the perpetrator's stated excuse for the killing. All recorded cases resulted in the death of the victim. SFI's database does not record suicides that women and girls commit to avoid burdening their family with committing femicide; hence, the report does not address these incidents.

Data collection on femicides is a challenging task. Conceptually, the documentation of femicide requires an understanding of the perpetrators' inner motives as the gender-related motivation of the killing is the decisive factor for an act to amount to femicide. This information may be difficult to establish, or investigative authorities may lack the awareness or competences to record it. In the Iranian context, these conceptual challenges are exacerbated by structural problems. According to its own information, the Iranian Government does not provide accurate and complete statistics of gender-related killings of women and girls. Further, it does not allow journalists to report freely on the topic. Iran ranks among the top ten most repressive countries for media, effectively controlling every piece of information that is shared with the public. The Iranian cyber-policy even monitors and regulates social media posts, albeit to a lesser extent than other media as citizens use technological tools to circumvent the controls. Additionally, law enforcement authorities often fail to recognize or acknowledge femicides and classify them as incidents of disappearances instead. In cases involving family members or a history of domestic violence, they may refuse to act upon reports, relegating the disputes as private family matters that are of no concern for the state. These factors discourage many family members of victims from reporting femicides and lead to inaccurate public records. In marginalized regions of Iran such as the province of Sistan and Baluchistan, the lack of reporting and statistics is even more precarious as there are numerous structural problems, such as lack of internet access and poverty. Additionally, many of its residents, mostly members of ethnic minorities, do not have identification documents, as a result of which the government cannot verify the victims' identities or produce accurate statistics. Further, residents are only scarcely represented in government institutions due to discriminatory practices against minority groups and are therefore reluctant to interact with public officials.

Due to these limitations, SFI's database is by no means an exhaustive list of all femicide incidents of 2022. The actual number of femicides is likely to be higher. Nonetheless, the available data provides a window into the landscape of femicides in Iran and helps map these killings and analyze their circumstances.

## KEY FINDINGS OF A DATA ANALYSIS

Based on the analysis of 191 documented femicide cases in 2022, this report identifies the following patterns:

### 1- Femicides are prevalent yet under-reported.

- The 191 documented femicide cases in 2022 are equivalent to approximately one killing every other day at an average of 16 cases per month.
- Compared to 2021, the number of documented femicide cases increased by 17%. This may be the result of a higher tendency in the society to report cases and an increased rate of femicides implicating the Iranian Government.

### 2- Young Women are Losing their Lives and their Names

- The victims of femicide are predominantly young women between the ages of 20 and 35.
- In nearly 60% of the cases, the victims' names are not publicly known. This may be part of a strategy to either protect the affected families from societal repercussions or bury the identity of the victims.
- Child marriage puts women and girls at risk of femicide. For instance, in February 2022, a man decapitated his 17-year-old wife, Mona Ghazal Heydari, after she attempted to flee from their home in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, to Turkey because she found herself in an abusive marriage to which she was forced to consent at the age of 12.

### 3- Not an Ethnic or Rural Problem:

Femicide Plagues All Regions of Iran:

- Virtually all Iranian provinces witnessed incidents of femicide in 2022. However, about 30% of all recorded cases (58 cases) were committed in Tehran and a similar percentage (37 cases) occurred in the eastern provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, Khuzestan, and Bushehr combined. Thus, nearly half of the documented femicides happened in a relatively small geographic area.
- The documentation shows that five cases of femicide happened in the provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan. While there may be many reasons for the low number of cases, it is interesting to note that in these provinces, residents generally have limited access to the internet, many do not have identification documents, and government institutions, including law enforcement authorities, are underfunded. Thus, SFI has strong reasons to assume that the actual number of femicides is much higher in this province.

### 4- Perpetrators are Violent and Relentless:

- Most victims were either slaughtered (37% of the cases) or shot (20% of the cases) by the perpetrators. Some modi operandi of the femicides are particularly gruesome.

- In roughly 20% of the cases, the perpetrators used their “bare hands” to kill the victims. They beat or strangled them or threw them from a building. For example , on July 23, a 27 year old woman from Mahabad in Kurdistan region lost her life in a violent crisis in which her husband allegedly beat her with a belt, then strangled her to death, before hanging her lifeless body on a noose to stage a suicide. Another 16-year-old girl in Khomeyn who was planning to run away from home was captured by her father and uncle who beat her to death.

#### **5- Most Intimate Contacts as Perpetrators:**

- In 75% of all cases, the perpetrator was known to the victim. In particular, the husband was involved in the commission of the femicide in nearly half of the cases. Other perpetrators included the boyfriend, brother, father, fiancé, family friend, male members of the victim’s family in law, neighbor, son, or uncle.
- 6% of the cases were committed by state security forces.
- In the other roughly 20% of the cases, the perpetrator is unknown.

#### **6- They Kill Just Because:**

- Family and other disputes (55% of the cases) are the primary excuses that perpetrators cite for committing the femicides. In 11% of the killings, honor is specifically mentioned as the sole crime motive. Honor considerations could however play a role in a higher percentage of femicides, particularly those resulting from family and other disputes; information about the nature of these disputes is not publicly available. Nonetheless, these findings reveal that femicides occur for many reasons, and the disproportionate power of men over women seems an important factor in the commission of these crimes.
- A closer look at the femicides resulting from family and other disputes reveals that some of these arguments arise from banalities. In August 2022, a man allegedly killed his wife in Tehran for spending too much time on the mobile phone. Another was murdered because she reportedly refused to serve her husband tea.

#### **7- The Next Generation is Watching:**

- In 20 cases, the victims’ own children witnessed the femicides and cruel methods of killing. For instance, last November in Khorasan, a man reportedly beat his wife to death while his five children were in the house and then sat with them to eat lunch. In other cases children were the ones who had to report the horrific events to family members or the police.
- In numerous other cases, bodies are found on street corners, or severed heads are displayed in public, exposing the public to the level of violence and creating a sense of threat for women and girls in the society.



### 8- Getting Away with Murder:

- While information about criminal investigations into the documented femicide incidents is often missing, several case reports indicate that perpetrators have not been charged with a crime at all or have received only low sentences. This situation risks creating a culture of impunity around femicide, enabling the commission of further killings.
  - In one of the most publicized cases of femicide in Ahvaz, Sajjad Heydari, the man who was videotaped parading with the severed head of his wife, Mona Heydari was found guilty of murdering his 17 year old wife but was sentenced to only eight years in prison– a sentence.
  - In other cases families are reticent about pressing charges against male perpetrators who are breadwinners for the family, fearing destitution and other social consequences.
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## WHY DO FEMICIDES HAPPENS IN IRAN?

The documented incidents do not reveal detailed information about the root causes of femicide in Iran, but they indicate several underlying issues. In particular, the perpetrators' perceptions that they can solve family disputes or restore their honor by killing women or girls highlight deeply ingrained gender inequalities and power imbalances. These issues are a general theme in Iran, primarily stemming from culture and religious misconceptions. In fact, the exercise of near absolute control by men over women and girls and the de facto authority they enjoy to make significant decisions about females' lives is a general manifestation of power imbalance across cultures within Iran. These values combined with a strong emphasis on honor create social pressure for families to kill female relatives who are perceived to have acted in a way that dishonored the family. Concepts of family, honor, and religion motivate families to arrange for the killing in an effort to protect or restore the honor of the family that is perceived to be violated by the actions of the victim.

Further, the culture of impunity surrounding femicide may be related to a general lack of reporting and a flawed legal system. Family members of femicide victims are often hesitant to press charges against the perpetrators because they are mostly from the same family and the perpetrator may be the family's sole breadwinner. This renders many people reluctant to officially report incidents. And even if they report, they face numerous legal obstacles as the Iranian legal system tolerates femicide through several provisions. Article 220 of the Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Penal Code) exempts fathers and paternal grandfathers who kill their children and grandchildren, respectively, from the Islamic retaliatory punishment (Qisas), which is the punishment provided for murder under Iranian law. The perpetrator may however be liable for paying blood money (Diyat). Article 209 of the Penal Code also protects other perpetrators of femicide by stating that a man who kills a woman shall be held accountable for

Qisas only if the victim's family pays half of the blood money. Since the victim and perpetrator of femicides are mostly from the same family, the family members may shield the perpetrator from punishment by simply not paying the blood money. Similarly, Article 302 of the Penal Code exempts any perpetrator of murder from Qisas if they can establish that the victim committed a crime under Sharia law, such as consensual same-sex relations, adultery, or certain sexual conduct outside of marriage. These are the very reasons that perpetrators of femicide often cite to justify their heinous acts. In these cases, the perpetrator may still be subject to imprisonment of three to ten years according to Article 208 of the Penal Code. Also, Article 630 in combination with Article 226(2) of the Penal Code gives the husband the right to kill his wife on suspicion of adultery without facing any punishment. Thus, the Iranian criminal law includes numerous provisions that allow for exemption from punishment or at least sentence mitigation in cases of femicide. Combined with the law enforcement's lack of competences or willingness to recognize acts of femicide and intervene in domestic disputes, this allows perpetrators of femicide to literally get away with murder and sends a signal to others that acts of femicide go unpunished.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data analysis, SFI recommends the follow measures to prevent and respond to femicides in Iran:

### Recommendations for Civil Society Actors

- SFI further suggests increasing awareness efforts on femicide on the ground to increase society's understanding of the effect of these killings on the family and wider community and their root causes, best practices in de-escalating domestic disputes, and available reporting channels and protection mechanisms.
- SFI recommends expanding the documentation efforts of femicide cases to create an updated and accurate incident database to identify patterns and implement targeted prevention and response measures.
- SFI calls on the clergy to leverage their influence in the local communities and speak out against femicide, clarify religious misconceptions regarding gender roles, the use of violence, and family relationships.
- SFI recommends conducting research on and documenting suicide committed by women and girls at risk of femicide. This could include collecting information about such incidents, analyzing their root causes and impacts on the affected families and communities, and identifying legal, mental health, and other relevant support channels for women and girls at risk of suicide and their families.
- SFI recommends the Iranian Government to dedicate prevention tools, mental health counseling, and educational resources across the country to transform perspectives, attitudes and behaviors that lead to violence against women and girls.
- The Iranian Government should engage local and regional stakeholders, including men and women to implement appropriate measures across the country, particularly in the neglected marginalized regions.

### Recommendations for the International Community

- SFI recommends the international community, particularly United Nations human rights treaty bodies, to demand Iran to comply with its human rights obligations, modify its legal system accordingly, and take effective measures to prevent and respond to femicide.
- SFI recommends that the Iranian government be held accountable for their policies regarding protection of the lives of women and girls and consider sanctions for their negligence.
- SFI asks international donors of Iranian civil society actors to allocate funding to study the phenomenon of femicide and fund programs to support women and girls at risk, their families, and advocates.
- SFI asks women's rights activists around the world to increase their attention to the plight of women and girls in Iran and include them in their activism and advocacy efforts.

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