

Pray for Women in Iran

This prayer guide has been created for International Women's Day (8 March). We're choosing to focus on praying for justice for women in Iran, and are thankful to our friends at Elam Ministries who have contributed first-hand testimonies and expertise to create this guide.

We're aware that as you read through this guide, you may think of other nations and contexts where women's rights are limited or oppressed. Allow this guide to act as a starting point for your prayers for others.

The annual Global Gender Gap Report looks at women's access to education, economic participation, political empowerment, and healthcare in 146 nations throughout the world.

Iran consistently ranks in the bottom five nations, and in 2022, they were ranked at number 143 out of 146.¹

A note on how to pray through this guide

- While we created this resource for International Women's Day, feel free to use it at any time of year.
- We've separated the guide into sections to help you work through it: Praying for young girls, young women, the older generation of women, activists, and people in power. You can pray through this guide in its entirety, or you can choose one section to spend time on.
- This guide has a lot of information in it. Don't feel like you have to pray about every single thing mentioned. Allow the Holy Spirit to highlight a few specific points, and don't be afraid to spend your time on them.

Some ideas for getting the most out of this guide

- If you're praying in a small group, assign each person a topic and ask them to explain 'The situation' to the rest of the group. Then read the story aloud (if applicable) and pray through the prayer points together.
- If you're praying in a bigger group, print out the stories and the prayer points from each topic and put them in different parts of a room, inviting people to walk around the room as they pray.
- Use paper and pencils or markers to answer the question 'What does Jesus want for women in Iran?' Get creative in your response.

Pray for young girls and teenagers in Iran

The situation

As a young girl growing up in Iran, you absorb the message that you are not as important as the boys in a million little ways. Parents hope to have boys, all schools are gender-segregated, girls aren't generally allowed to play with the boys, and in many areas, girls have to wear a hijab from the age of nine.

The legal minimum age of marriage for boys is 15, while for girls it's 13 – but girls as young as nine years old are legally allowed to get married if they have their father's permission.² The government offers 'marriage loans' to newlyweds – but if the daughter is under 18, the money goes to her parents. This has prompted some parents to arrange marriages for their underage daughters: between March and June 2020, 7,323 marriages involving girls ages 10 to 14 were legally registered.³

Ways to pray

- Pray for a change to the government loan scheme that incentivises parents to arrange marriages for their young daughters; that it would only be available for people over 18.
- Pray for an end to child marriage altogether; for the laws around minimum age of marriage to be changed, for communities to create a new standard to hold one another to account for, and for childhood to be protected.
- Pray for the protection of innocence and joy for all children in Iran: for healthy families, safe communities, and a sense of inherent love and value for every child.

Rana's story shows both the darkness that young girls in Iran can face, and the hope for change in the generations to come:

Rana's story

My dream was to study and get a good education. But my family had other plans. When I was 14, my father arranged my marriage. I had no say. It was miserable. After just 17 days, I discovered my husband had begun a 'temporary marriage' with another woman. I sank into depression and our marriage became an endless cycle of arguments. I turned to drinking and self-harm.

I also endlessly sought out books as an escape. In one book I read something astonishing: 'Jesus came into the world to forgive sins.' Something about this statement grabbed my heart. I simply couldn't forget it. Then, one night, I had a beautiful dream of Jesus welcoming me into his family. It made me determined to find a Bible. As soon as I got hold of a copy, our life began to change. I put away alcohol. My thoughts of self-harm faded. I even started to fall for my husband.

Eventually, God opened the door for me to join a house church. And as I was taught, I grew. I shared the Gospel with my husband and he was hungry to hear. He too has become a believer. Today, I can fully indulge my love of studying. Whenever I can, I seize the chance to stock up on precious treasure: more Christian books. It's a risk to have Christian books and Bibles in Iran. But for me, it's always worth it. My family stole my dreams of studying when I was a child. But now I am continually studying, learning more about Jesus and sharing what I have learned with others.

Pray that Jesus continues to transform families in Iran, so that the next generation of young girls can live in freedom.

All testimonies are taken from Elam's website: www.elam.com

Pray for young women in Iran

The situation

As young girls in Iran grow into teenagers and women, their freedoms continue to be policed. Segregation continues – public spaces and buildings often have different male and female sections, and laws around public 'decency' (including things like wearing a hijab, totally covering your hair, and even not wearing nail varnish) are policed by roving 'morality police' who have the right to arrest and violently 'correct' any woman who doesn't perfectly conform.

In spite of restrictions on the courses that women can study, they make up around 60% of university graduates in Iran. Yet in 2021 only 18.9% of the entire workforce was filled by women.⁴ This is down to a number of factors: discrimination in the hiring process, harassment in the workplace, and the ruling government's position that a woman's place is in the home. Ultimately, keeping qualified women away from work intentionally prevents them from achieving any kind of independence.

Young Iranian women have access to the internet, and they can see how differently women around the world live – many are angry about the way their rights are being taken away and desperate for change.

Ways to pray

- Praise God that Iranian women have access to higher education! Pray that education becomes easier to access, for an end to the course restrictions that stop women from studying certain topics, and for education to continue to be valued.
- Pray for attitudes around women in the workplace to shift, and for many more opportunities for women to use their education.
- Pray for courage and resilience for young women in Iran – that they will persevere and continue to have a vision for a different future.

Bahar's story

It's great to be a woman. And it's great to be an Iranian. But, it is really hard to be a woman in Iran. A woman in Iran has little identity and security. As an Iranian woman, you are forced to cover up. You shouldn't look joyful because people will judge you. You rarely get encouragement. Praise belongs to men.

Women endure the pain of childbirth, but the child belongs to the man. Women must accept that their husbands are allowed to have up to four wives. And if a woman is caught in adultery, it's the woman who is punished, not the man. Iranian women are tired. We are tired of discrimination, tired of all the hidden tears, and tired of feeling like we are never heard. We wish we were men.

Now, can you imagine hearing the Gospel in the middle of a life like this? Jesus changes everything for Iranian women - he certainly did for me! I was taught women should keep quiet. But Jesus asks us to speak for him. I was taught women should mourn. But Jesus gives us joy. I was taught you cannot trust men. But the love of Jesus helps us to love and trust others. I was told God is far away. But Jesus wants to draw near.

When an Iranian woman tastes the love of Jesus, like the Samaritan woman in Luke's Gospel, she can't remain silent. She can change a whole village.

Bahar has personally been used by the Lord to bring over 100 Iranians to Christ. She and her husband are trained leaders who now train others in evangelism and discipleship with Elam.

Amen, Lord. Do it again!

All testimonies are taken from Elam's website: www.elam.com

Pray for activists in Iran

The situation

There have been multiple protests against the regime in Iran over the years – notably, the Green Movement in 2009 and ‘Bloody November’ in 2019. These were brutally suppressed by the government, with many protestors shot dead right in the street. Most recently, a wave of protests was triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman who died after being detained by morality police in September, 2022.

This wave of unrest has been different than previous movements. Firstly, it has centred explicitly around women’s rights, with the hijab dress code as the symbolic focal point. Secondly, it has brought together a wide variety of different demographics and movements.⁵ The government hasn’t backed down, though – in fact the chief of police, General Hossein Ramini, has cracked down, saying “Although the sentence for not wearing a hijab [head-covering] is two months in prison, anyone encouraging others to take off their hijab will be jailed for 10 years.”⁶ Street protests have been met with violence and protestors are being brought to sham trials. Currently, Iran holds the world record for most executions of women.⁷

Ways to pray

- Pray for leaders to rise up. A movement like this, uniting so many different people, requires wise leaders. Many of the grassroots leaders of resistance are women – pray for unity, wisdom, and determination for them.
- Pray for encouragement and perseverance for the protestors. When the government shows no sign of responding to the needs of the people, it can be very discouraging. Pray that they don’t give up.
- Pray for safety for the activists and organisers.
- Pray for continued international attention on the rights of women in Iran, and pray for diplomatic ways to cause change.

Pray for the older generation of women in Iran

The situation

Many of the older generation of women in Iran sympathise with the anger that the younger generations are expressing – yet, they want the best for their daughters

and they may see conforming to social expectations as the safest and wisest thing to do.

Married women in Iran have very little recourse or defence from widespread spousal abuse. There are no laws against domestic violence or marital rape, and there are very few reasons that women can legally seek a divorce. Men, on the other hand, can easily get a divorce, marry multiple wives, and will be favoured in most custody rulings. Even in cases where women get custody of their children after a divorce, the father still needs to grant permission for many aspects of their children's lives.

And yet, women are at the heart of the underground church. An estimated 60% of new converts to Christianity are women,⁸ and they are powerful evangelists, using their relational authority and community connections to bring many people to Christ.

Ways to pray

- Pray for laws protecting women from violence to be enacted.
- Pray for the older generation of women in Iran to have hope that things can change for the better.
- Pray for many families to be transformed by meeting Jesus.

Hassan's story

When I told my wife Shirin that I wanted to follow Jesus, she thought I was mad. But then she noticed the changes in me. I had treated her terribly until that point. I was always angry and beat her often. But after I became a Christian, I never hit her again. I started to spend time with her. I even helped in the kitchen. In time, Shirin also gave her life to Christ. I had left Iran to win Europe for Islam. But thanks to previous generations of church planters, there was a church in a small city on the Iranian border. That church changed everything for me and my family.

Amen, Lord. Do it again!

All testimonies are taken from Elam's website: www.elam.com

Pray for those in power in Iran

The situation

The treatment of women in Iran is essentially determined by a theocratic government that is enforcing a very narrow definition of Shia Islam. It is not representative of Islam as a whole, and it is not universally held even in Iran – prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women enjoyed much more freedom.

If we want to see lasting change in Iran, we have to pray for the attitudes of leadership to change.

Ways to pray

- Pray for the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, to have a radical encounter with Jesus.
- Ali Khamenei has been in power since 1989: pray that his successor has a different approach to women's freedoms.
- Pray for the judges in Iran – many of them support the Islamic Revolution, but occasionally one of them will make rulings that seem to support a more lenient society. Pray that the judges enforce true justice in their rulings.
- There are a few women in government positions, though they tend to be highly conservative in their views. Pray for their safety and encouragement, and pray they will help to change lawmakers' minds about the role of women.
- Pray for leaders on all levels: headteachers, employers and CEOs, local governors, local police, and fathers and grandfathers who are legally responsible for their families. Real lives can benefit when people with localised authority act with more compassion and justice - whether that's because they've met Jesus or not.

Praying into justice issues that are this huge, systemic, and overwhelming can be very disheartening. But remember: God is at work in Iran. The Iranian church is estimated to be the fastest growing underground church in the world, and as we've seen through the first-hand stories in this guide, Jesus is transforming lives and families every day.

Thank you, God, for the ways you are moving in Iran. We pray for your justice and righteousness to be established in this nation that you love.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ The Global Gender Gap Report, 2022, p.9. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022>. Accessed March 1, 2023
- ² U.S. Department of State, 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iran>. Accessed March 1, 2023.
- ³ Women's Committee of Iran NCRI, 'Official statistics on early child marriage in Iran: the top of the iceberg of disaster', online article, <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2021/08/23/official-statistics-on-early-marriage-in-iran-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-of-disaster/>. Accessed March 1, 2023.
- ⁴ The Global Gender Gap Report, 2021, p.221. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf. Accessed March 1, 2023.
- ⁵ The Democracy Forum, 'Seminar Report: turmoil and transition', online article, <https://www.thedemocracyforumltd.com/seminar-report-turmoil-and-transition>. Accessed March 1, 2023.
- ⁶ United Against Nuclear Iran, 'Iran's War on Women', online article, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/irans-war-on-women>. Accessed February 23, 2023.
- ⁷ Women's Committee of Iran NCRI, 'Iran regime, the world record holder in executions of women', online article, <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2022/10/10/executions-of-women/>. Accessed March 1, 2023.
- ⁸ Dr. Mojdeh Shirvanian, Elam Ministries, "The floodgates are open" Jesus Speaks Farsi, podcast audio, May 27, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6HErILWBSj3k7b4DnuoLzi?si=cf898d3392064023>.