

Woman, Life, Freedom

Shahrbanoo Hamzeh's curatorial statement for the "Woman Life Freedom" exhibition at Woman Made Gallery, May 6 to June 3, 2023.

I am Shahrbanoo Hamzeh, an Iranian woman artist and curator doing my best for my people and homeland in this crucial time. The people and land that I was forced to leave.

Putting together this exhibition is personal to me, it is about who I am, where I am from, and what is happening in my country, my home these days. *Woman, Life, Freedom* has its roots in a previous iteration held in January 2022, at Joe McCauley Gallery, Normal, Illinois. Starting as gallery coordinator there, the very first show I curated was about being a woman in Iran. Women who are leading the revolution these days. That exhibition was born for the very same reason the current revolution started, women's rights.

I also had the chance to put together an iteration of that show 3 months into the revolution, December 10th, 2022 to January 7th, 2023, at The MAC Gallery, Dallas, Texas, and bring some elements of the revolution into the exhibition. Elements like scarves, burnt scarves, social media, and graffiti. We also had a few video art pieces that use videos of the protests, graffiti, and other acts of the revolution happening. With these additions and the involvement and help of the Iranian diaspora and art community of Dallas, the show evolved to be more in line with the revolutionary atmosphere of Iran. The power and unity that we felt working together to better express the Iranian women's experience were incredible.

On the same note, this exhibition is created based on an open call from Woman Made Gallery and I am excited to include new voices who understand, feel, and stand with Iranian women. People whose stories elevate and add on to Iranian women's stories. This show tries to hold space for our shared concerns for people fighting for civil rights worldwide. I am looking forward to the learnings, and shared moments and am grateful for the continued dedication to this effort to raise awareness.

When I was putting the initial exhibition together, I had no idea what the future held for us. Inspired by the lack of awareness surrounding the more than four decades of state-sanctioned violence perpetuated by the Islamic Republic against the Iranian people, I hoped I could help gradually change the situation for women in my homeland through art.

Something I was not considering at the time was that many others like me, both inside and outside of Iran, have been doing their part for freedom. Around eighty-five million people inside Iran and eight million more across the Iranian diaspora have personally fought for freedom and human rights, just like me. This and the endless brutality of the regime triggered a big demand for change. Today more people know about Iran but at the cost of the blood of many Iranians.

On September 16th, 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian, Kurdish woman, Mahsa Zhina Amini, was murdered by the Iranian morality police. *Amini's death was the last straw*. Across Iran, people flooded the streets chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom". During protests, many, including children, have been arrested, killed, tortured, and raped by the regime's forces. Outside of Iran, the Iranian

diaspora has taken up the fight for their homeland, human rights, and freedom. They have become the voice of the people in Iran.

When protests began, mainstream media outside of Iran remained silent. This is a consistent pattern when covering events in Iran. This media blackout lasted for more than a week, after which, reports were inundated with misinformation and underreporting. Normally that would have been all the information provided outside the country, but this time the involvement of social media changed the outcome. Overwhelming reports on social media forced the media to begin covering the events occurring in Iran. Despite both the regime shutting down the internet and *Meta* blocking information coming out of Iran, social media users were able to circumvent restrictions via the creative use of social media platforms and VPNs.

Curating and participating in art exhibitions, showcasing the experience of Iranian women, is my way of contributing to the cause. *Woman, Life Freedom* brings together information, conversation, and visual elements surrounding this enormous fight for human rights. Some Iranian women artists from the exhibition's previous iteration will show their work at WMG.

We are inviting everyone to do something and get involved. To see the crimes against humanity that Iran's ruling regime commits daily and how the problem is everyone's issue, and it is closer than it looks. If enough people care, change is not out of reach.

Since Masha Amini's death, Iranian people have been shedding blood, sweat, and tears for freedom. They are in the street fighting with their bare hands, and they need support from outside the country. Today it is important to me, more than ever, to speak about human rights violations in Iran, especially toward women. I am more of a fighter than an artist these days. I want to make sure the bravery of high school girls in my country can be seen, so it is not in vain.

Teenagers are at the forefront of this war, and they are paying in blood for it, but this is all they can do in my country given all the regime's limitations and oppressions. I want to see them free and thriving, not tortured, sexually abused, and dying by the regime's forces (Basij and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)), just for wanting their basic human rights and bodily autonomy back. *A girl is not even allowed to exist under the gender apartheid* of the regime. They must fight tooth and nail for the simplest things. They are denied a normal life by the government. Under these oppressive circumstances, their fight is incredibly powerful to see. With this show, we are hoping to add on to their voice.

The life of women in Iran is a living hell. In the eyes of the law, woman's value is half that of man's. For countering a man, two women should speak out in court. The compensation for killing a woman in an accident is half of a man. Women are not allowed to sing. Women are not allowed to leave the country, get divorced, obtain an education, have a job, or even stay at a hotel without the permission of their husbands or, if unmarried, their fathers'. Women must wear whatever the government wants them to wear from the age of 7, irrespective of their family's religious beliefs. Many women serve lengthy prison sentences for opposing the mandatory hijab laws.

An Iranian is fighting the regime simply by existing since all aspects of our normal life are against what the regime stands for, one way or another. As horrifying as it is, it is also making the regime vulnerable in a way. Everyone is contributing to the change. In Iran having a boyfriend or girlfriend is illegal and can get you arrested, you might be stopped by the morality police to be asked who the guy is that you are in a car with or walking on a street with. A father or a husband owns their daughters and wives and if they kill them, there will be no justice for the victims. The age of marriage by law is 13 and can go as young as 9 if supported by a judge. Basically, child marriage and even pedophilia are not crimes. You will be executed for being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

If you practice any religion other than Islam, you are not allowed to attend public school and university. You cannot convert to another religion if you were born in a Muslim family, and you cannot become a nonbeliever or atheist. If you do any of those, you are sentenced to death. Media, art, film, and all content are censored by the government. Playing music or dancing in public is punishable by law. You might get arrested even for posting a video of your dance at your own home on Instagram. Having a pet dog is illegal and if you have one it will be taken away from you and, probably killed. On top of it all, if you speak up against the government you will be imprisoned, tortured, and even killed. This has been the reality of living in Iran since 1978. There is no gray area, no hard decision here, the regime is pure evil, nothing good came out of it in these long 43 years prior to the 2022 revolution and no good will ever come out of them. We have tried. We wanted some reforms in 2009, and they answered with bullets; we wanted a reasonable price on gas in 2019, and they answered with bullets; they answered with bullets even to old farmers in a very peaceful sit-in that occurred in the city of Isfahan for the simple need of water. These are but just a few of the ways we have tried to reason with this regime. We have tried many times to make them hear us over the course of their time controlling the country. Enough is enough. Now we want them gone.

We are fighting since November 2022 for a regime change, nothing less. Interestingly now the regime propaganda machine is trying to make it about some insignificant changes in the current system or even use people's movement to progress their own agenda in an international setting like ending the sanctions or having a nuclear deal.

This regime cannot be trusted by any means and should be omitted from the world sooner than later. Their evil will come to everybody eventually if we do not stop them. It is unbelievable but they sided with and are helping Russia in killing Ukrainians. In the same way, the Ukrainians are dealing with the current regime of Iran these days, everyone anywhere will be hurt by this regime in one way or another.

Please be on humanity's side and act before it's too late. The people of Iran will be in the streets to the last breath, but there are only so many people to put their lives on the line, it needs to go to the next step, and we, the people who live in a democratic country, can help it happen. The part that we can help with can be done from the safety and comfort of our own homes. We can use this opportunity to be on the right side of history, practice feminism in its purest form, and tell the story to our children later. It is an opportunity to teach the next generation about human rights and how to defend them.

You may ask what it is that we can do. First of all, do not ignore or forget about this crisis that is happening in the 21st century in our world. You can elevate the voice of Iranians. Talk about it, be aware, and share on social media about it. Social media is important because it was the space that gave Iranians the opportunity to leak information out of the country in the first place during the silence of mainstream media. Also, because the government shut down the internet in Iran during the protests to kill people easier. So please do not be a bystander, be a part of the protests, be a protester. even if it is by reposting a story on Instagram.

More importantly, citizens can make their representatives take some actions. The nuclear negotiations must be off the table, completely and explicitly. The US, EU, and UN must investigate crimes against humanity by the Islamic regime and officially support the will of the Iranian people for regime change. The western governments including the US must implement targeted sanctions on the regime's officials, their families, their assets overseas, and regime-related lobbies including NIAC. Democratic countries must fund and supply technology infrastructure with companies like Starlink to support the people. EU, UN, and US must facilitate conversations with the oppositions in exile like prince Reza Pahlavi, Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmaeilion, and others in the preparation of a peaceful transition government for people's will for their future to happen. Western countries must expel all the regime's ambassadors to slow the regime's propaganda machine abroad. Any sort of negotiations with the current regime must stop and any relation with them must be cut off, they are not representatives of the people of Iran, they are their captors and people, their hostages.

In hopes of freedom for the Iranian people.

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Shahrbanoo Hamzeh - January 10, 2023