



**IRAN**  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS

**WOMEN  
AND THE  
DEATH PENALTY  
IN IRAN**

**WORLD DAY AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY 2021**

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# INTRODUCTION

The 2021 World Day Against the Death Penalty is dedicated to **women**; those who risk being sentenced to death, who have received a death sentence, who have been executed, and to those who have had their death sentences commuted, exonerated, or pardoned. In observation of the day and the theme this year, Iran Human Rights is providing a report on the women executed in Iran over the last 12 years (2010-2021). The female executions in this period are by no means representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran's complete history of executing women; the number of female political prisoners executed in the 1980s must be acknowledged due to their sheer volume and abhorrent nature. But even today, there is ample evidence of their cruel and inhuman treatment of women, which will be highlighted in this report.

Today, Iran has the highest number of executions after China, and is one of the world's top executioners of women. Of the 16 women reported to have been executed globally in 2020,<sup>1</sup> nine were executed in Iran.<sup>2</sup> As with all executions, the majority of women executions are carried out secretly. When reported, women are often portrayed as evil mothers, femme fatales or conniving schemers. The reality however is layered with legislative and social discrimination, inequality and taboos, which this report aims to examine.

On the occasion of the World Day Against the Death Penalty 2021, IHRNGO repeats its call for Iran to establish a moratorium on the use of the death penalty as a first step towards the abolition of the death penalty, and for women to be entitled to equal civil rights and equality before the law. Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, IHRNGO Director said: "In 2021, the world should not tolerate laws that legitimise the death penalty, which is the most cruel, inhumane and discriminatory punishment of our time. This World Day Against the Death Penalty, let us be the voice of the women on death row who are mostly unknown and from marginalised backgrounds."

# BACKGROUND

The context and background of female executions in Iran must be examined through the legislative framework of the death penalty in general, and of the breaches of rights and social issues faced by women specifically. A comprehensive report on the death penalty in Iran is published annually by Iran Human Rights and ECMP (Together Against the Death Penalty), which provides a detailed breakdown of the legislative framework and procedures.<sup>3</sup> A more condensed version relating to female executions in this period is provided for the purpose of this report.

The death penalty is sanctioned for a number of crimes which cannot be considered “most serious crimes” and do not meet the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Iran in 1975. Of the cases recorded in 2010-2021, all but two (espionage) of the known charges against the 164 women were for drug-related offences and murder. Once arrested, confessions are the most common way of proving guilt in death penalty cases. All death row prisoners IHRNGO has been in contact with have testified to being subjected to torture in order to confess to the crime they were charged with. This is not limited only to those with political or security-related charges. Almost all prisoners who were arrested for drug-related offences have been kept in solitary confinement and subjected to physical torture in the investigation phase following their detention, while being denied access to a lawyer. In many cases, confessions extracted in detention have been the only evidence available for the judge to base his verdict upon. Torture is also used in other criminal cases involving rape or murder where there is not enough evidence against the suspect. Furthermore, in qisas cases, a woman’s testimony is considered worthless and they are not entitled to be witnesses.

The important point to note is the systematic denial of legal due process, unfair trials, use of torture and duress, forced confessions and lack of a transparent and independent judiciary in Iran. The charges in each case, therefore, are the official account and charges by Iranian authorities, and have not been confirmed by independent individuals/bodies.

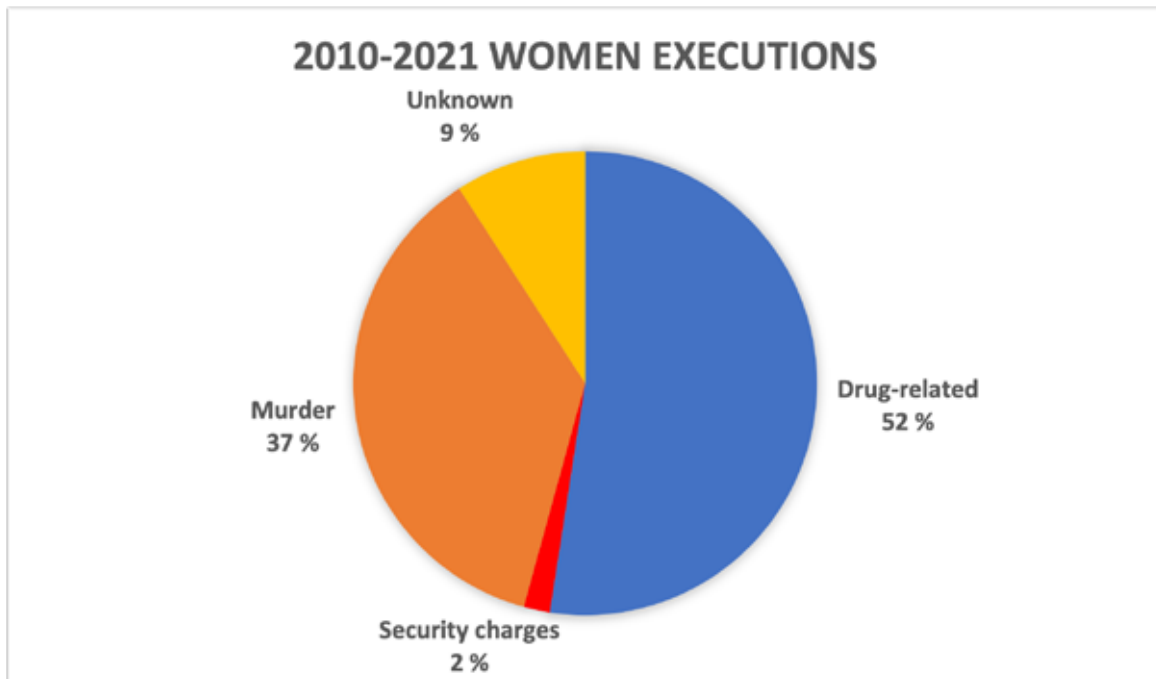
Women also face inequality before the law and societal discrimination prior to having committed any crimes. As with global statistics, poverty is an underlying factor in death penalty cases. This is particularly evident in drug-related executions but also extends to murder cases. Traditionally, men are considered the breadwinners and when working class women who were not afforded an education or professional skills are left to raise their children alone, without any support from the state, they are forced to do what they can to survive. When a single mother of five, including a disabled child, was executed on drug-related charges, her family could not even afford to bury her. And her case is by no means isolated or unique.

Societally, women also face forced marriages; six child brides were amongst the women executed in 2010-2021 and one woman (Safieh Ghafouri, charged with murder) was an *aroose-khooon-bas*, a bride offered by one tribe to the opposing tribe to stop the bloodshed. Within the marriage itself, a woman does not have the right to divorce, even in cases of domestic violence and abuse, which are hidden in cultural codes and language. In 66% of the known murder cases, the women were convicted of killing their husband or partner. Mental illness also remains a taboo subject, with inadequate care and treatment within Iranian society at large.

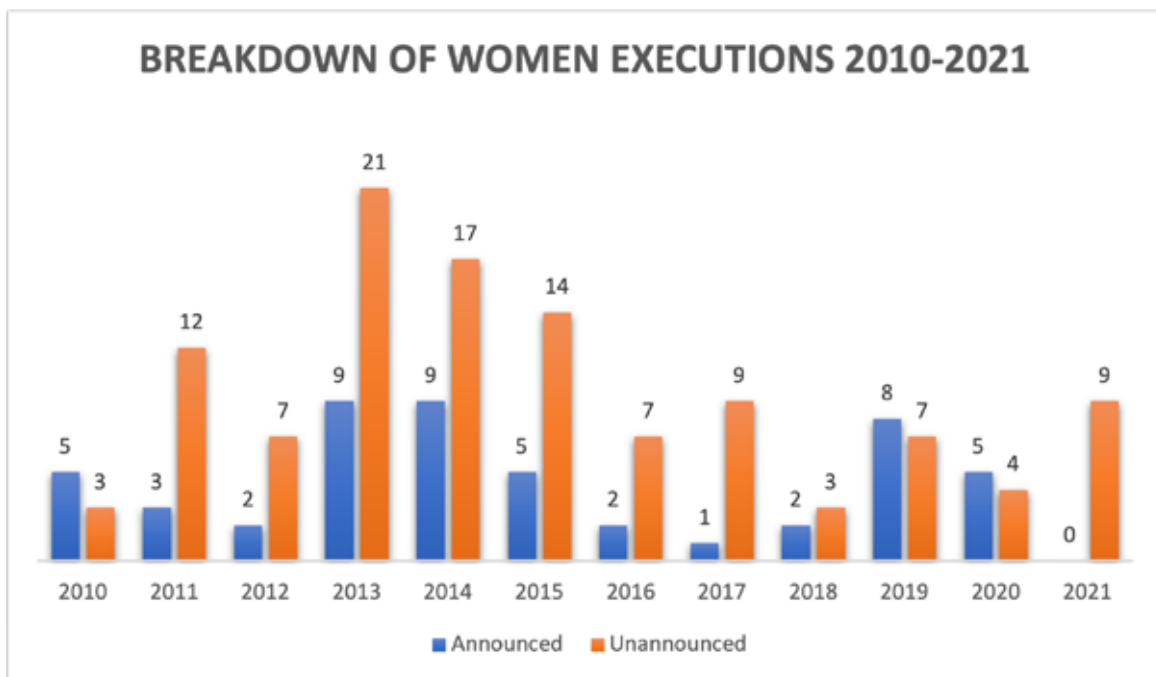
# FACTS & FIGURES

The following statistics relate to the execution of women recorded by Iran Human Rights between 1 January 2010-10 October 2021:

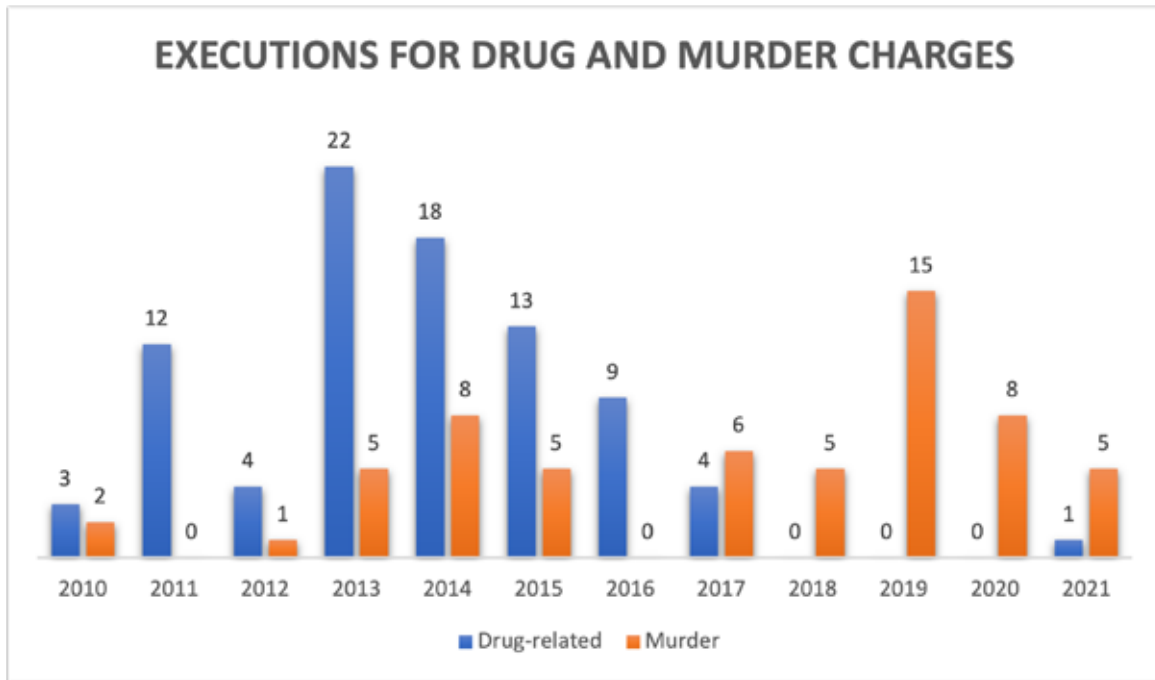
- At least 164 women were executed
- Female executions represent 2.57% of all executions in the same period
- 31% (51) of the executions were announced by official sources and 69% (113) were carried out secretly or were not announced
- At least 86 women were executed on drug-related charges
- At least 60 women were executed on murder charges
- Of the three women executed on security charges, two were executed on espionage charges
- The third woman (Shirin Alamhooli), was executed on the charge of *moharebeh* (enmity against god) for membership in a Kurdish opposition group
- The charges against 15 of the women are unknown
- The average number of women executed annually for murder charges doubled after the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law
- 3 of the executed women were juvenile offenders
- A woman (Zahra Bahrami) was executed on drug-related charges after being arrested in relation to the 2009 nationwide protests and originally sentenced to *moharebeh* (enmity against god)



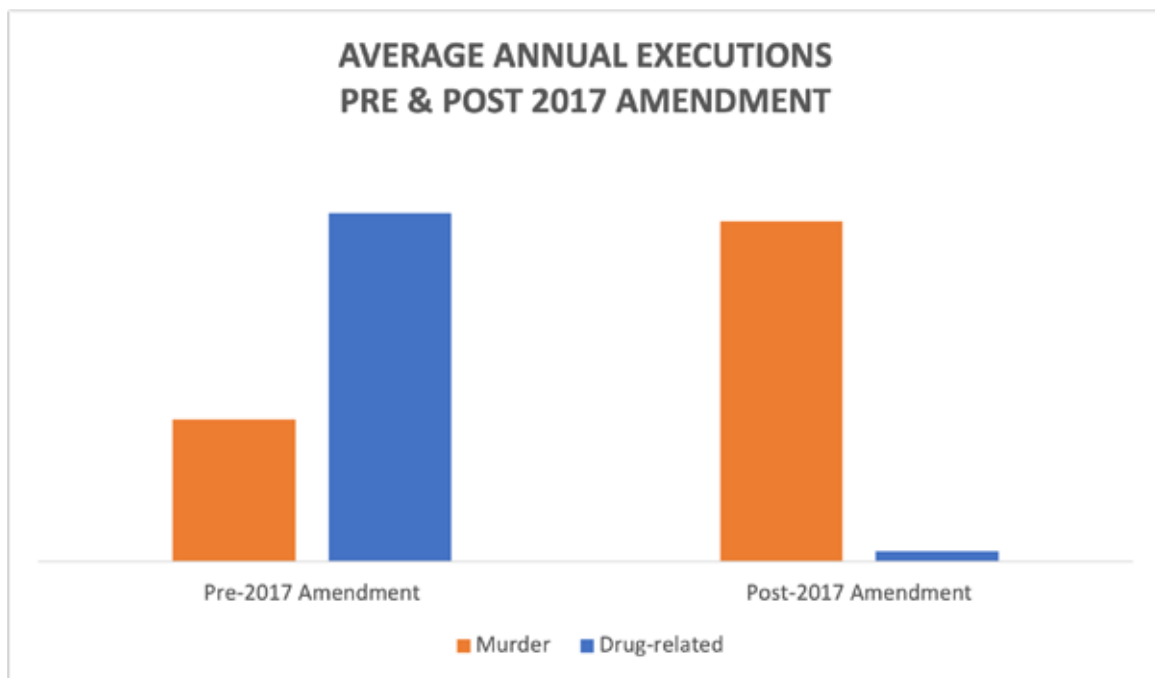
***In 2010-2021, of the known charges, all but three women were executed on murder and drug-related charges and the charges against 15 women are unknown.***



***In 2010-2021, only 31% (51) of the executions were announced by official sources and 69% (113) were carried out secretly or were not announced***



**86 women were executed on drug-related charges, 60 on murder charges, 3 on security charges and the charges against 15 women are unknown**

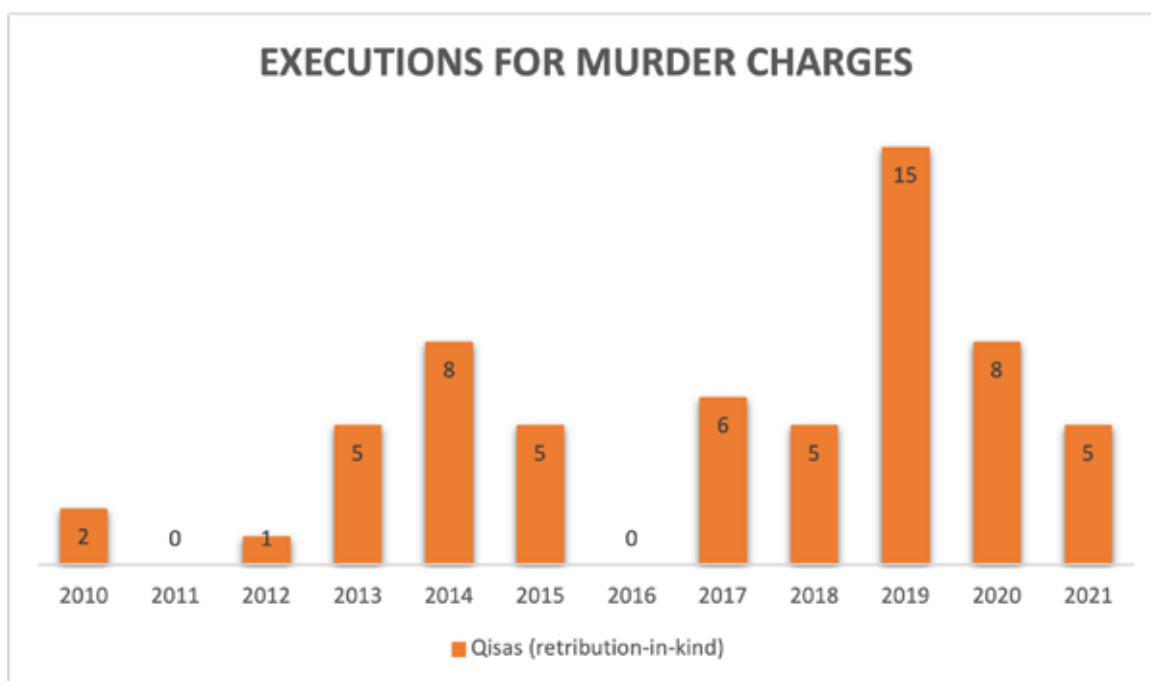


**The average number of women executed annually for murder charges doubled after the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law**

# QISAS EXECUTIONS

Qisas or retribution-in-kind is the right of the murder victim's family according to the Islamic Penal Code. The State effectively puts the responsibility for executions for murder in the hands of the victim's family to decide whether they want retribution, *diya* (blood money) or to forgive. Qisas death sentences are also imposed for juvenile offenders as, according to Sharia, the age of criminal responsibility for girls is 9 and for boys 15 lunar years (8.7 years for girls and 14.6 years for boys).

- 60 women were executed on murder charges in 2010-2021
- Murder charges account for more than 90% of all female executions since 2018
- Of the 60 executions, the details of 41 of the cases have been established and 19 are unknown
- 66% of the 41 women were charged with the murder of their husband/fiancé/lover/temporary marriage
- 6 of the women were child brides
- 3 were under 18 years of age at the time of committing the alleged murder (juvenile offenders)
- 2 suffered with confirmed mental illnesses
- 3 of the women had committed murder in self-defence against rape
- 1 of the women was an *aroose-khoon-bas*



**The average number of women executed annually for murder charges doubled after the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law**



# CASES

## REYHANEH JABBARI, 26

Reyhaneh was sentenced to *qisas* after being convicted of killing a man in self-defence against rape. She was tortured to make self-incriminating confessions but later published her account of the events from prison. She was executed on 25 October 2014.<sup>4</sup>



## ZEINAB SAKAMVAND

Zeinab was a child bride and a juvenile offender who was also a victim of domestic violence and of rape by her brother-in-law. She was accused of killing her husband at 17, which she denied. She married another prisoner in prison and gave birth to a still-born child prior to her execution on 2 October 2018.<sup>5</sup>

## ZEINAB KHODAMORAD, 43

Zeinab suffered from acute mental illness and was hospitalised following the birth of her child. She killed her child and step-child after her husband discharged her against hospital advice. She was executed on 29 December 2020.<sup>6</sup>

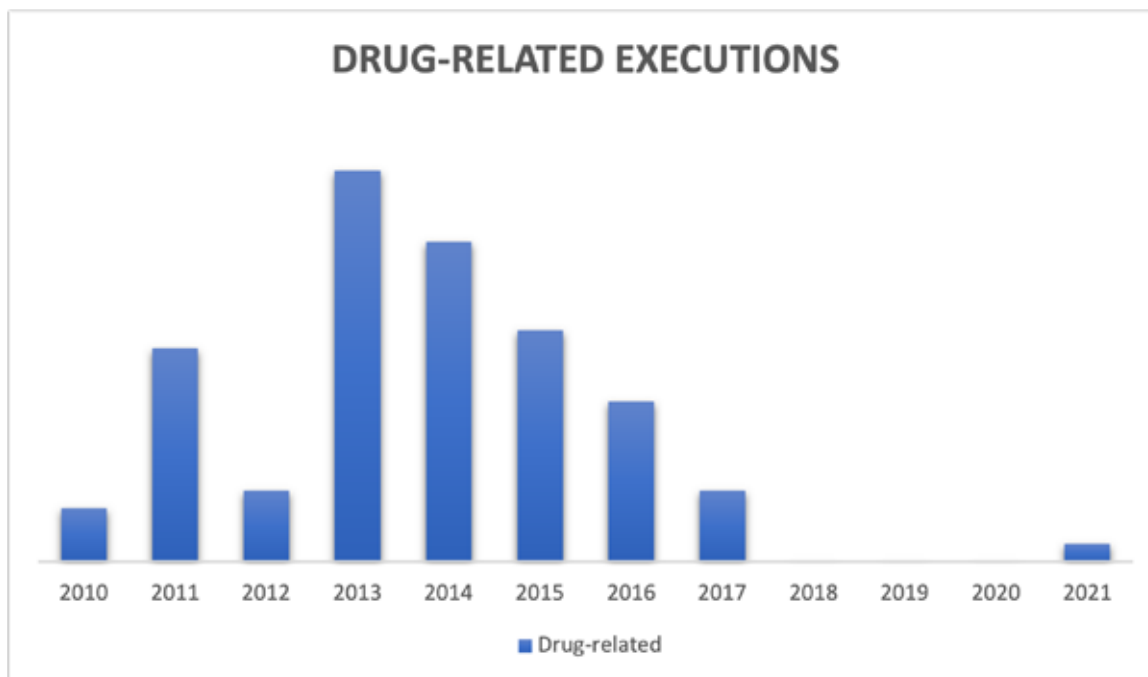
## MARYAM KARIMI

Maryam was a victim of domestic abuse but her husband refused to consent to a divorce. She was on death row for 13 years with her father, Ebrahim Karimi, who helped her kill her husband. Her execution was carried out by her own daughter and her father was brought in to see Maryam's dead body hanging on the noose after her execution on 15 March 2021.<sup>7</sup>

# DRUG-RELATED EXECUTIONS

Before 2018, drug charges counted for the majority of female executions in Iran. A new amendment to the Anti-Narcotics law came into force on 14 November 2017 which included a mechanism to limit the use of the death penalty.<sup>8</sup> This led to a significant drop in the number of drug-related male executions and a complete drop in female executions until 30 May 2021, when a woman was executed in Qazvin Central Prison.<sup>9</sup>

- Drug-related executions are dominated by underlying poverty issues
- In 2011, protester Zahra Bahrami was executed on drug-related charges after being arrested in relation to the 2009 protests and sentenced to *moharebeh* (enmity against god)



**The 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law led to a complete drop in drug-related executions until May 2021**

## CASES

### **HOURLIEH SAHABI, 35 AND ROGHIEH KHALAJ, 32**

Hourieh was a single mother of 5, including one disabled child and Roghieh a single mother of 2 who were the breadwinners of their families. They were executed on drug-related charges in Hamedan Central Prison in October 2011.<sup>10</sup> Hourieh's family could not afford to bury her.

### **ZAHRA BAHRAMI, 46**

Zahra was a dual national protester who was arrested in the aftermath of the 2009 nationwide protests. She was originally sentenced to *moharebeh* (enmity against god) but was later tortured to confess to drug-related charges in a fabricated case that ended with her execution on 29 January 2011.<sup>11</sup>



## POLITICAL EXECUTIONS

Security charges that carry the death penalty include *moharebeh* (enmity against god), *efsad-fil-arz* (corruption on earth), *baghy* (armed rebellion) and espionage. The vague charges under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Courts are often used against political prisoners.

# CASES



## SHIRIN ALAMHOOLI, 28

Shirin was arrested in 2008 and sentenced to *moharebeh* (enmity against god) for membership in PEJAK, a Kurdish opposition group by the Revolutionary Court. She did not speak Farsi at the time of her interrogation and legal proceedings. In letters from prison, she described three months of physical and mental torture. Shirin was secretly executed in Evin Prison on 9 May 2010.<sup>12</sup>

## WHAT CAN BE DONE

- Enforce a moratorium on the use of the death penalty as a step towards abolition
- Removal of all discriminatory laws against women to ensure due process and equality before the law and grant women the right to equal divorce
- Impose a ban on child marriages
- Provide legal protections against domestic abuse and violence against women

## ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ACT5037602021ENGLISH.pdf>
- 2 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4728/>
- 3 [https://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport\\_iran\\_2021-gb-290321-BD.pdf](https://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport_iran_2021-gb-290321-BD.pdf)
- 4 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/1136/>
- 5 <https://iranhr.net/fa/articles/2669/> and <https://iranhr.net/fa/articles/3504/>
- 6 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4554/>
- 7 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4668/>
- 8 [https://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport\\_iran\\_2021-gb-290321-BD.pdf](https://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport_iran_2021-gb-290321-BD.pdf)
- 9 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4760/>
- 10 <https://iranhr.net/en/reports/9/>
- 11 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/666/>
- 12 <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/558/>

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World Day Against the Death Penalty  
10 October 2021