

**Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education; the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls**

Ref.: AL IRN 3/2023  
(Please use this reference in your reply)

10 March 2023

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences and Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 44/3, 51/21, 49/24, 50/7 and 50/18.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the deliberate poisoning of more than 1200 schoolgirls since November 2022.

According to the information received:

The first reported poisoning of schoolgirls in Iran occurred on 30 November 2022, at the Nour Yazdanshahr training school for girls in the city of Qom. The same school was hit with another poison attack on 13 December 2022, which made 51 students and staff ill and prompted more than 30 families to sue education officials in Qom to demand an investigation.

Since November 2022, targeted chemical attacks against girls' schools have been reported in 91 schools located in 20 provinces across Iran. The poisonings have already resulted in hundreds of schoolgirls being hospitalized with victims describing the gas agent and its effects in similar terms, including breathing difficulties, fatigue, burning throats, nausea, headaches, numbness in the body and heart palpitations, or inability to move. Many parents have reportedly removed their daughters from school for fear of these attacks.

It is reported that, for months, State authorities have failed to conduct credible and swift investigations into these attacks, seeking rather to deny them. Following a gas poisoning incident that resulted in at least 117 schoolgirls being sent to the hospital in Qom on 14 February 2023, angry parents reportedly gathered at the governor's office to demand answers. However, Education Minister reportedly dismissed the parents' concerns and accused them of being influenced by "rumors". Eventually, on 26 February 2023, both the Deputy Health Minister, Mr. Younes Panahi and a member of the parliamentary health commission placed the responsibility in the hands of individuals who would like all schools, especially girls' schools, to be closed. Mr. Panahi reportedly indicated that the chemicals used were not military grade nor were they publicly available, without however providing information as to the exact nature of these chemicals. In addition, a couple of

days later, on 1 March 2023, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi again dismissed the intentional nature of the chemical attacks stating that 90 per cent of the reported cases could be attributed to “stress”. State-affiliated media outlets have similarly described the poisoning incidents as an attempt by students to miss exams. Eventually, on 6 March 2023, Iran’s Supreme Leader Mr. Ali Khamenei publicly denounced the poisoning of schoolgirls as an unforgivable crime which should be severely punished. Four months since the first attacks however, no arrest have been reported by State authorities.

Of similar concern is information received according to which:

In late February 2023, an 11-year-old girl reportedly died because of gas poisoning at a school in Qom. Her father, who is reportedly the driver of a member of the Assembly of Experts, was reportedly warned by Qom’s prosecutor not to speak to the media and was pressured into burying his daughter without notice. The father was also reportedly pressured into appearing on television and declaring that his daughter was not at her school on the day the poisonings occurred, that she had suffered from pain in her legs and died of “severe blood infection”.

On 2 March 2023, the students of “13 Aban” School were attacked by poisoning. Worried parents gathered outside the school. During the protest, a man, apparently identified as a plainclothes intelligence agent, violently beat a woman. The video of the violent beating of the mother was widely circulated on social media. In response, Iran’s Law Enforcement Command spokesperson reportedly claimed that immediately after being informed about this incident, a team of police officers was sent to the school and that their investigation concluded that the police was not involved directly or indirectly.

It is also reported that Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Elite Military Forces were sent into several hospitals and, in some instances, staff were physically attacked. In Khorramabad University hospital, in Lorestan province, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps reportedly took the blood tests that were to be analysed by their own specialists. On 23 February 2023, a group reportedly carrying knives attacked the Shahid Rahimi Clinic in Khorramabad and injured several doctors and nurses. They claim to be the relatives of the poisoned students but it appeared they were not related to any of the staff or patients.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of the above-mentioned allegations, we are alarmed by the large-scale poisonings targeting schoolgirls in an apparently coordinated manner; by States authorities’ denial for months of the deliberate poisoning of hundreds of schools girls and the absence of any information as to investigations conducted, if any, and whether any attempts have been made to arrest and hold perpetrators accountable. We would like also to express our deep concern in relation to the highly disturbing sequence of events that led to the poisoning of schoolgirls. The attacks started only a few weeks after women and girls initiated the movement “Women Life, Freedom”, through which they manifested their opposition to compulsory hijab and voiced their demands for equality and respect. Hence, there is a viable possibility that the poisonings may have been carried out by State or non-State actors in reprisal for these legitimate actions.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on the investigations conducted and their outcome, including on the number of schools attacked, their location and the number of schoolgirls affected by the poisoning attacks and their health status, whether any suspects have been arrested, and the nature of chemicals referred to by the Deputy Minister of Health.
3. Please provide information as to the comprehensive measures that the Government intends to take to ensure that the inalienable right of Iranian girls to a safe and secure education environment is going to be upheld and protected.
4. Please also explain whether investigations validate the declarations of the Interior Minister on 1 March.
5. Please provide information on the measures which have been put in place to prevent further poisoning attacks.
6. Please provide information about allegations that parents, doctors and parents and others may have been subjected to pressure in order not to disclose information about these attacks.
7. Please provide information on allegations of mistreatment of parents and in particular the violence against a schoolgirl's mother referred to in the letter
8. Please indicate your government's actions to ensure the personal security and integrity, and the equal and non-discriminatory access to education of all girls in Iran.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Farida Shaheed  
Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Tlaleng Mofokeng  
Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

Javaid Rehman  
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Reem Alsalem  
Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

Dorothy Estrada-Tanck  
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

## **Annex**

### **Reference to international human rights law**

The reported allegations would be in contravention of the rights of every individual to life, physical integrity, right to equal recognition before the law, and the right to education as laid down, *inter alia*, in articles 3, 5, 6, 9, 14 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); articles 6, 7, 9, 16, 17, 19, 24 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by your Excellency's Government on 24 June 1975, as well as articles 2.2, 12 and 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (ICESCR) ratified by Iran on 24 June 1975, and article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified in 1994.

We remind your Excellency's Government of the legal obligations of States under international human rights law to respect, protect and fulfil women's rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to non-discrimination and equality set out in Article 3 and 26 of the ICCPR and Article 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We further would like to draw your attention to Human Rights Council resolution 31/32, in which States expressed particular concern about systemic and structural discrimination and violence faced by women human rights defenders. States should take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of women human rights defenders and to integrate a gender perspective into their efforts to create a safe and enabling environment for the defense of human rights. This should include the establishment of comprehensive, sustainable and gender-sensitive public policies and programmes that support and protect women defenders. Such policies and should be developed with the participation of women defenders themselves.

Article 13 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) stipulates the right of every person to education. As underlined by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment 13 on the right to education, States or those effectively having control over a territory have the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education. The obligation to respect requires States parties, and those with effective control over a territory, to avoid measures that hinder or prevent the enjoyment of the right to education. The obligation to protect requires States parties, or *de facto* authorities, to take measures that prevent third parties from interfering with the enjoyment of the right to education. The obligation to fulfil (facilitate) requires States to take positive measures that enable and assist individuals and communities to enjoy the right to education. Finally, States parties have an obligation to fulfil (provide) the right to education. As a general rule, States parties are obliged to fulfil (provide) a specific right in the Covenant when an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to realize the right themselves by the means at their disposal (see E/C.12/1999/10, paras. 46-47).

We would also like to recall to your Excellency's Government that the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, in its report on participation in public life (A/HRC/23/50) stated that women human rights defenders are often the target of gender-specific violence such as intimidation, attacks, and death

threats which are sometimes condoned or perpetrated by State actors. The Working Group has further called upon States to eliminate all forms of violence against women in order to fulfil women's human rights and to improve the enabling condition for women's participation in political and public life. In addition to these provisions, we would like to remind your Excellency's Government of the General Assembly resolution 68/181, on the protection of women human rights defenders. Specifically, we would like to refer to articles 7, 9 and 10, whereby States are called upon to, respectively, publicly acknowledge the important role played by women human rights defenders, take practical steps to prevent threats, harassment and violence against them and to combat impunity for such violations and abuses, and ensure that all legal provisions, administrative measures and policies affecting women human rights defenders are compatible with relevant provisions of international human rights law.

We remind your Excellency's Government of the legal obligations of Iran States under article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence. We also would like to draw your attention to General Comment No. 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC/C/GC/13 para. 5) to protect child victims and witnesses from human rights violations, to investigate and to punish those responsible, and to provide access to redress human rights violations.

We wish to refer your Excellency's Government to the report of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, on State responsibility for eliminating violence against women (A/HRC/23/49) which notes the lack of State accountability for social structural deficiencies, such as ongoing gender discrimination, create environments that are conducive to acts of violence against women. While laws, policies and resources are crucial to effectively address violence against women and girls, efforts must be coupled with renewed will and actions to combat the structural and systemic challenges which are a cause and consequence of such violence. Also, in order to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls, such violence has to be understood as an element which affects women through their life cycle and is underpinned by a complex interplay of individual, family, community, economic and social factors. This requires recognizing that State responsibility to act with due diligence is both a systemic-level responsibility, i.e. the responsibility of States to create good and effective systems and structures that address the root causes and consequences of violence against women; and also an individual-level responsibility, i.e., the responsibility of States to provide each victim with effective measures of prevention, protection, punishment and reparation.

We would like to recall your Excellency's Government that the Working Group on Discrimination against women and girls, in its report on participation in public life (A/HRC/23/50) expressed in paragraph 65 that women human rights defenders are often target of gender-specific violence such as intimidation, attacks, and death threats which are sometimes condoned or perpetrated by State actors. The Working Group has further called upon States to eliminate all forms of violence against women in order to fulfil women's human rights and to improve the enabling condition for women's participation in political and public life (according to the paragraph 97 (i) of the abovementioned report). In addition to these provisions, we would like to remind your Excellency's Government of the respective resolutions of the General Assembly GA Res 68/181 and of the Human Rights Council HRC Res 31/32, expressing particular concerns about systemic and structural discrimination and violence faced by women human rights defenders. States should take the appropriate measures to ensure their protection and to integrate a gender perspective into their efforts to enable a safe environment for human rights defenders.

We would like to further recall your Excellency's Government that the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, in its report on girls' activism (A/HRC/50/25) expressed that young women are mobilizing worldwide to demand and catalyse change on critical global issues. They are at the forefront of initiatives aimed at transforming societies towards social justice, gender equality and sustainability. The realization of girls' and young women's human right to participate in public and political life, including organizing and engaging actively with a variety of State and non-State actors, is essential for the protection of their human rights. The Working Group has called on States to ensure that mechanisms are in place to solicit the views of girls in all matters of public interest affecting them directly or indirectly and to give due weight to those views.

Further the Working Group has noted that school-related gender-based violence takes different forms including with girls in being violently targeted for attending school. Such violence severely curtails girls' educational opportunities. The Working Group has urged States to eliminate all discriminatory laws and practices which prevent girls from completing their education and to ensure all girls' de facto access to education, including mandatory, free primary education and access to secondary and tertiary education, free of discrimination (A/HRC/26/39).

We appeal to you to take all necessary measures to guarantee all women and girls the right to be free from any gender-based violence, discrimination and abuse. Towards that end, we would like to draw your attention to the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, which states that women are entitled to the equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. In this context, we would like to bring to your attention Article 4 (c & d), which notes the responsibility of States, or those effectively controlling a territory and its people, to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons. To this end, States should develop penal, civil, labour and administrative sanctions in domestic legislation to punish and redress the wrongs caused to women who are subjected to violence, and to families of the victims.

We are further alarmed at the alleged killings of minors which are afforded a special protection under article 24 of the ICCPR. The obligation to protect the right to life requires that States take special measures to protect persons who are in vulnerable situations and whose lives are particularly endangered by specific threats or preexisting patterns of violence, including children (CCPR/C/GC/36, para. 23). We also refer to articles 6 and 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Iran on 13 July 1994.

We would also like to recall that, under article 13 of the ICESCR, everyone has the right to education. As underlined by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment No. 13 on the right to education, education in all its forms and at all levels shall exhibit a number of interrelated and essential features. In particular, educational institutions and programmes have to be accessible to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party (E/C.12/1999/10, para. 6).