

# [***Exclusive: Iran VP Reveals Steps to Improve Women's Rights—'We Still Need Work'***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJ6-PY81-DY68-10M3-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 2871 words

**Byline:** Tom O'Connor

**Highlight:** "There is always room for improvement," Iranian Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Ensiyeh Khazali told Newsweek.

**Body**

One of Iran's highest-ranking female officials outlined to *Newsweek* measures she said are being taken by the Islamic Republic to boost the role of women in Iranian society amid Western condemnation over alleged abuses.

Speaking to *Newsweek* in an exclusive interview on the sidelines of the [*United Nations*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/united-nations?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) Convention on the Status of Women (CSW) being held this week in New York, Iranian Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Ensiyeh Khazali acknowledged that Iran's women's rights situation was far from perfect. But she asserted that the issue was a priority for her government, led by President Ebrahim Raisi and overseen by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, both conservative clerics.

To illustrate this point, Ensiyeh shared a number of specific initiatives, some already being implemented and others being debated in parliament, to uplift Iranian women in economics, law, ***politics***, and other key fields.

She condemned international reactions to the case of 22-year-old [*Mahsa Amini*](https://www.newsweek.com/iran-protests-timeline-how-death-mahsa-amini-caused-shockwaves-1764454?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), whose death in September 2022 under disputed circumstances while in police custody over allegedly failing to adhere to the country's strict dress code sparked widespread protests across the nation. Now, she said, Iran was not only moving to ensure enhanced women's rights at home but also seeking to promote the status of women abroad, especially in light of the conflict in Gaza and the lingering refugee crisis from Afghanistan.

Ensiyeh also argued that Iran was not envious of the women's rights conditions in the West, listing a number of negative statistics pertaining to the plight of women in the United States. Instead, she stated that Tehran was committed to paving its own path toward supporting the struggle for better female representation and empowerment in the Islamic Republic, even leaving room for the possibility of a future female president in Iran.

*The following transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

***Newsweek*: Can you speak a little bit about the importance of your appearance here in New York and some of the goals and the message that that you wish to convey?**

**Khazali:** Every year, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women deals with issues and problems that women the world over encounter. And every year has a theme, and the theme of this year was poverty reduction for women and prevention of the feminization of poverty.

This is particularly important against the backdrop of the fact that we see shifts of legislation, we see shifts of policies, climate change, wars break out, and all of these impact how we become poorer. And speaking of poverty, women are normally at the center and the hardest hit.

Speaking of poverty, it's the people in Gaza that are in a dire situation due to the outbreak of war, relentless bombardment and displacement, and homelessness, as well as the blockade. And all of these hit children and women the hardest. According to a U.N. women report, four out of five women said that they eat half of what they did before the war in Gaza broke out. Four out of five also said that they would have to skip a meal in order to be able to feed the children of the family. In 95 percent of those cases, it's the mother of the family that will have to skip that meal.

This is as concerns the international picture of the status of women. And going to the national level, we took the opportunity of the CSW and presented a report of the efforts that my country has undertaken in order to reduce poverty for women and empower them economically, among other things.

As we speak, one percent of the budget of every ministry in Iran is allocated to women and family affairs. This is a preemptive measure to prevent injuries or harms that would otherwise be directed towards women and families. On another front, we have tried to facilitate the employment conditions for women, particularly for female-headed households. Now, as we speak, 80 percent of all the facilities and banking loans provided to domestic businesses go to women-owned businesses.

**I would like to talk more about the situation in Gaza and the region, but first I want to address some of the controversy stirred by your visit from advocacy groups over allegations that Iran does not live up to its international commitments when it comes to women's rights issues. What would you say to those critics and about Iran's efforts regarding not only the economic situation of women at home but also their political and human rights?**

We have made every endeavor in order to ensure that our women actively grow, be it in the field of business, be it in education, or still the academic trajectory. The number of women-run knowledge-based companies are on the rise. Just like I said earlier, 80 percent of the facilities and banking loans have gone to women-owned domestic businesses.

We haven't spared any effort on any contribution that could help women become educated and run their own businesses. All of these have made it possible for us to reduce women's unemployment rate by two percent. That the conglomeration of all these efforts in their own right is a testimony to the fact that we have provided the ground for our women to grow, be it on the scientific and academic fronts, or still on the economics side.

Going to rural areas, we have lent our support to women there. They have now become enabled to apply for financial support so that they will be able to continue the work and sustenance and livelihood in the village where they reside. We have also put these women on social security insurance coverage. The rural women who have several children are given priority. This will also ensure some sort of salary for these women.

We do hope that we will be able to further develop this program and expand it and extend it to include all housewives. This also goes down in our constitution, and the moment the government will be able to assign the necessary budget, this will come about.

We have also tried to improve on the status of women in the country when it comes to political participation. As per a decision, every ministry and executive body needs to have a woman as an adviser. This adviser will operate at the level of either deputy minister or director general. In this way, we have ensured that women will be given the opportunity for better political participation. They will also be involved in administration. They will also see a raise in the salary that they are receiving. And all of this means that they will be women of more influence.

Another pertinent issue that is also very noteworthy with regards to women advisers in the ministries and executive bodies is that these women should also contribute actively to the decision-making processes when it comes to decisions. And when it comes to decision that pertain to women's affairs, they should also be given some sort of a veto right.

We also have a number of high councils where important decisions are made, and my president has appointed one or several women to actively contribute to the councils in question. In addition to that, the honorable president has also appointed a special assistant for civil rights in whose mandate reads that the special assistant will have to actively deal with the promotion of women's rights.

**During your recent address at the Commission on the Status of Women, you called for Israel's expulsion at a time when Israel has come under mounting international pressure over the human rights situation in Gaza. If Iran's presence is justified there in spite of the disagreements from Western countries, are you concerned that targeting Israel's participation could also potentially expose Iran to calls to be expelled from this commission, and why do you think Israel, in particular, should have to be kicked out of this arena?**

In fact, that's the self-same question that we would like to ask the United Nations. The Islamic Republic of Iran does support the oppressed. The Islamic Republic of Iran supports and endorses women's rights. The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the rights of those who have been deprived of their rights, stripped of their rights in one way or another, a case in point being Iran's support for Afghan refugees and provision of services to Afghan refugees, particularly women.

We have provided this fertile ground for them to be able to pursue their education in our universities. And right here, I would like also to mention that our University of Medical Sciences has been nominated as the top university among 1,000 universities providing services, health services to women and children.

The reason for that is that our University of Medical Sciences is providing services to the Iranian population just like they do to the Afghan refugees and women and children. So, we have not spared any contribution or any effort to support the rights, of course, as far as we have the means and that our budget allocations allow.

Now, let us compare this with the media havoc, with the media commotion that we witnessed when we had the death of a young woman [in September 2022]. Through lies and through gossip, they expelled Iran from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. And, in turn, we see over the course of the past five months, more than 22,000 women and children have been killed [in Gaza]. Pregnant women are in dire situations, they are deprived of food and medicine.

How come the United Nations is operating under such double standards? This is the self-same question we would like to ask the United Nations

**Beyond what you say Iran's been doing at home to improve the status of women, part of these events here in New York revolve around the international situation. What has Iran been doing as far as the region to address some of the women's rights issues, particularly, as you mentioned, when it comes to conflicts that we've seen in Gaza, as well as in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, along with other arenas? Are there areas where Iran has stepped up to promote better practices and support for women in these countries?**

Speaking of operational potential, well, Iran does not have operational potential to make interventions in such cases. However, in line with our policy of supporting the rights of women and the oppressed, we've been making speeches in the United Nations, we've been engaged in advocacy activities in international organizations, and we are committed to supporting the oppressed people regardless of where they are in the world.

It is a duty and responsibility for us to lend our moral support to them, just like we have done to our neighboring Afghanistan, putting those who dropped out of education on the educational support, and we've been ever since hosting a large number of Afghan refugees, putting them under the coverage as far as our means have allowed us.

**You spoke before about the steps that Iran is taking to improve the political situation of Iranian women, as well, at home. Prior to the most recent Majles election,** [***we spoke with***](https://www.newsweek.com/iran-sees-most-women-run-election-break-glass-ceiling-1874553?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) **some female Iranian candidates and experts who support the government but believe that more can still be done to improve the status of women at home. Do you believe that there are still areas where you can improve and in which Iran is currently working to uplift the status of women in society, especially after the protests that we saw a year and a half ago?**

There is always room for improvement. There is always room for progress. And we make no pretense to being ideal or even close to ideal. There are areas where we still need work, in the judiciary, for example, and then on the legal front there is still work that needs to be done.

There are bills on the way that support families in regard to the issue of the custody of children, for example. Here, we need work. On the scientific front, we have tried to enter into agreements with the [Iran National] Science Foundation and with the vice presidency for scientific and academic affairs in order to create momentum and ensure that women are catered for and supported as it benefits them.

In business and employment, while it is important to note that the culture of Iran attaches great importance to the institution of the family and rearing competent, virtuous children, in this context we have tried to define flexible labor, flexible jobs for women whereby we will have enabled them to not only have and maintain their own professional life but also be able to engage in their family affairs and the upbringing of their children. This latter one has also been anticipated in the Islamic Republic of Iran's seventh development plan.

At the same time, we try we have tried to provide free-of-charge consultation services to the newlyweds. This will reduce costs of living for the couples and will be an aid to our women. And at the same time, we're trying to educate our women in a way for them to be supportive of their families.

**Do you think then, for example, there could be a female Iranian president one day?**

It's possible.

**We, too, have never had a female president and only now have our first female vice president. At a time when women in *politics* is still very much a debate here in the United States, I'd like to ask how you evaluate the women's rights situation here. Is this a situation that Iran seeks to achieve or are there differences in the Western perspective on feminism and that of Iran?**

Well, women's assumption of the presidency or political position is no index for securing women's rights. These are some sloganeering and feigned display of intention. You see, as we progress, we see increasing violence against women, we see trampling now of their rights and we see that their once-safe haven is being violated.

Let's take a look at violence against women or sexual harassment. I was looking at the official statistics published by the United States. The numbers are frustrating, nothing to compare with Iran, and maybe we could ascribe Iran's lower or better position to a number of laws that are in place, which act as some sort of prevention. I was looking at these statistics, reading how many women fall victim to domestic violence and how many are killed by their male friends or by their male next of kin. And the numbers are only horrendous.

What we see is, of course, in the name of freedom of women, but is, in fact, trampling or limiting the rights of women that they should otherwise enjoy.

Browsing U.S. websites, I come across these statistics published by the [*CDC*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/cdc?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) on sexual harassment. The numbers are horrendous. A few years ago, we witnessed a MeToo campaign launched. Women came forward and talked about their rights being violated. And the numbers that we're talking about are the numbers of women who disclosed that their rights were violated. Many do not come forward and do not speak for fear of name and reputation.

One out of four women has been raped, others have been groped, and the numbers do not spare children and adolescents either. Being subjected to such violence will leave a psychological and mental stain for good on the people in question, and all of this pertains to women's rights. We really need to explore the reasons why women are subjected to such sorts of a violation of their rights and what really causes them to be subjected to injury. In the United States, it seems that we need a revisit of the laws on women's rights.

Morality and ethics are going to waste. I would like to quote [U.S. intellectual Noam] Chomsky. He said that the United States today is considered the biggest threat to humanity. And all of this needs to make us ponder what is happening in the United States.

Now I would like to quote Chomsky again. He said there is only one party ruling in the United States, and that is the business party, and everything revolves around economy, profitability and benefit, and this sacrifices humanity. Women are used as bait in a number of industries, the nudity industry, or any other sexual industry revolving around the nakedness of women. Women are at the forefront of loss here.

**Your Excellency, Mrs. Vice President, thank you for your time. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Thank you for the patience that you have demonstrated. The most important thing as we speak is to maintain the identity of women. The identity of women has been dented the world over. It has been trampled and squashed by economy and profitability. And if in our own society, we try to speak of the veil that is the hijab, this is because we want to ensure that our women's rights are not violated, and we are setting privacy boundaries for them to be immune to violence and sexual harassment.

I really wish that we would rethink the way we treat our women around the world.

I was reading a survey carried out for *The Independent* [in 2019 by polling company D-CYFOR] on the correlation between dress code and the violation and harassment of women in which 55 percent of men and 41 percent of women said that there is a correlation between the way they dress and the way they are treated.

Now, these surveys are carried out by universities and academic circles. Why no one takes heed of them? Well, that's a pertinent question. Because power, economy and capitalist mafias would be lost in their business if one did pay attention to such statistics and correlations.

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2361335/iran-vice-president-women-un.jpg)

**Graphic**

Iran, Vice, President, for, Women, at, UN

United Nations Media

Iranian Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Ensiyeh Khazali speaks during the third plenary session of the 68th session of U.N. Commission on the Status of Women on March 11 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

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