

# [***Iran Sees Most Women Ever Run in Election—Can They Break the Glass Ceiling?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFF-DR11-DY68-125H-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Candidate Afifeh Abedi tells Newsweek she plans "to take on a more specialized role in foreign policy issues and women's issues."

**Body**

As Iranians prepare to head to the polls to vote in the 12th parliamentary election since the Islamic Revolution, a record number of female candidates are among the thousands vying for one of 290 seats in the male-dominated legislature.

Some 1,713 women were featured in the list of approved candidates issued by Iran's Guardian Council ahead of Friday's election, more than double the number allowed to run in the last vote that took place in 2020.

And yet female hopefuls still represented just a fraction of the 15,200 aspiring lawmakers in the running this year.

For some, however, the trend symbolizes a positive development for a country whose longstanding women's rights issues garnered renewed notoriety after the death of a young woman in police custody sparked nationwide protests in September 2022. Mahsa Amini, 22, had been arrested for failing to adhere to the nation's mandatory hijab laws, one of several issues that has sparked debate among those now seeking office.

"This issue was also one of the election candidates' topics, and there were differing views on the acceptance of diversity as well as on the hijab," Afifeh Abedi, a researcher and candidate in the 12th Islamic Consultative Assembly election, told *Newsweek*.

**Promising Signs**

Abedi defended Iran's democratic record, especially compared to other countries in the Middle East, but asserted that there was room for reform.

"The truth is that Iran is one of the most democratic countries in the region," Abedi said. "There are very good indicators in Iran regarding training, education, political and social participation, and even the use of women in middle management positions."

"However, some argue that women's contributions at high levels of power are insufficient in comparison to their political and social participation and expertise," she added. "My plan in parliament is to take on a more specialized role in foreign policy issues and women's issues."

Abedi felt that the unprecedented number of women allowed to run was a reflection of a growing realization that greater female representation in government could benefit Iran as it contended with an array of internal challenges.

"This belief has been completely reinforced that increasing women's perspectives on social and economic issues will solve some of Iran's problems," Abedi said.

**An Achilles' Heel**

Fereshteh Sadeghi, an Iranian journalist based in Tehran, told *Newsweek* she shares this belief. However, she also outlined some of the obstacles that have stood in women's way when it comes to seeking to effect real change in the Islamic Republic.

"I personally do believe that we have to expand the representation of women in the Iranian political arena and not simply the parliament, but that is the exactly the Achilles' heel of Iranian ***politics***," Sadeghi said. "I mean, the Islamic Republic wants women to be present at the parliament as a show of its respect for women, but at the same time it prevents women to seek their real position in the society."

"The glass ceiling for women persists, and Iranian women have many small and big issues that need to be resolved," she added. "The problem I see is that the women who usually are elected to represent their female populations usually walk behind their male colleagues rather than shoulder to shoulder with them."

The representation of women in parliament in Iran also remains low by international standards.

With just 16 female lawmakers constituting less than 6 percent of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Iran is tied with Antigua and Barbuda for 174th place in terms of the number of women in parliament, according to the last figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which did not include data for Afghanistan, Eritrea, Haiti, Myanmar, Niger, Sudan, Venezuela and Yemen.

By comparison, the United States was ranked in 71st place, tied with Iraq, both having 29.2 percent of lawmakers as women. In just six countries—Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Andorra and the United Arab Emirates—do women make up a majority or at least half of their respective legislative bodies.

**Men of *Politics***

Iranian officials have consistently rejected allegations that the women of their country have suffered any systematic oppression, even in the wake of the 2022 protests. In an exclusive interview just days after the first anniversary of Amini's death, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's wife, Jamileh Alamolhoda, [*told Newsweek*](https://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-iranian-presidents-wife-says-wests-feminist-violence-wont-work-iran-1828324?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) that "women in Iran have not fought for their rights because they already enjoy their rights."

Alamolhoda, who has taken on a more active role than past presidential spouses in Iran, criticized what she considered "violence" promoted by Western-style feminism and those seeking to corrupt Iranian society with outside ideals. At the same time, she acknowledged that Iran was an "evolving society" and that particular attention needed to be paid to ensuring cohesion between the people and their government.

When it comes to the role of women in the government, the issue has long been a center of debate in Iran and discussions reemerged around the issue during the leadup to the 2021 presidential election in which Raisi, a principlist conservative, ultimately emerged victorious.

Particularly contentious was the interpretation of Article 115 of the Iranian Constitution, which lists one presidential qualification as being a "rajol-e siasi," a term loaned from Arabic that literally means "a man of ***politics***." In an attempt to put the matter to rest, a spokesperson for the influential 12-member Guardian Council, also called the Constitutional Council, that is tasked with overseeing constitutional and election affairs, eventually stated that this phrase did not preclude a woman running for president.

In Iran, however, even higher powers exist than the head of state. Also taking place Friday alongside the parliamentary election is the vote for the 88-member Assembly of Experts, which has the power to appoint and, theoretically, dismiss the supreme leader, a post held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for the past 35 years. His only predecessor, Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, served for a decade until his death in 1989.

The process for vetting candidates for the Assembly of Experts is even more selective than that of the parliamentary registry and no woman has ever served in the high-level body. The sixth Assembly of Experts chosen on Friday will run for eight years and may be an especially consequential one as Khamenei turns 85 this year.

**Indifference on the Street**

Even with substantial issues at stake in both elections, reports persist of an expected low turnout. Khamenei himself addressed the issue on Wednesday, telling a gathering of first-time voters that a strong presence at the polls was crucial to national security and that enemies were looking to seize on any potential weaknesses.

"America, the policies of most Europeans, the evil Zionists, capitalists and big companies that follow Iran's affairs closely with various motives and reasons are more than anything else afraid of the people's participation in the elections and the power of the Iranian people," Khamenei said.

In a notably frank appeal to the populace, he warned that, "if the elections turn out poorly, no one will benefit, everyone will lose."

On the street, however, indifference appeared to remain prevalent. Sadeghi, for her part, attested to this sense of malaise among many Iranians who expect no big changes to come from the fast-approaching vote.

"I don't see or feel any excitement or hope among people about Friday's elections," she said. "As if everybody believes everything is the same old same old, no new face, no new promise, no change. In this situation, you don't feel the encouragement among people either."

**The Struggle Continues**

Skepticism toward the upcoming election was even more pronounced outside of Iran. Haleh Esfandiari, former deputy head of the Women's Organization of Iran who went on to found the Middle East Program at the Washington, D.C.-based Wilson Center, downplayed the number of women allowed to run this year as "a hollow gesture of little significance."

"The women and men deputies in the current parliament didn't dare raise virtually a single voice in support of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests that followed the death of the young Mahsa Amini in 2022," Esfandiari told *Newsweek*. "They observed a deafening silence instead. There is no reason to expect women elected to parliament in this election will prove any different."

She felt the turnout could prove a significant reflection of how much faith Iranians had in their government and the system as a whole.

"The level of voter participation will be significant," Esfandiari said. "The regime has always regarded high voter participation as proof of support of the government and its policies. But with popular opposition figures not allowed to run and many Iranians regarding the election as meaningless, the expectation is that many Iranians will vote with their feet—simply not show up to vote."

Still, Esfandiari was confident that Iranians would continue to express themselves in other ways, especially through the age-old Iranian tradition of protest.

"Clearly, the struggle for equal rights will continue, in the same ways as in the past: challenging the laws discriminating against women, protesting, and speaking out," Esfandiari said. "There have been and will be courageous women who will risk their freedom and even their lives to win women their rights."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2355439/iran-parliament-election-candidate-afifeh-abedi.jpg)

**Graphic**

Iran, parliament, election, candidate, Afifeh, Abedi

ATTA KENARE/AFP/Getty Images

Candidate Afifeh Abedi arrives at a campaign event in Abuzar, in southern Tehran, on February 26, three days before the 12th Islamic Consultative Assembly election. Abedi is among few female reformers running for parliament widely expected to be dominated by male conservatives.

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