



Association for
**Iranian
Studies**

Statement Regarding the Poisoning of Girls' Schools and Threats to Women University Students

April 24, 2023

We write on behalf of the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) to express our consternation and profound alarm over the poisoning of girls' schools in Iran. The continuing attacks on educational facilities for Iranian girls, and prior poisonings of women's university residences, undermine the basic precepts of academic freedom and human dignity that all Iranian students deserve.

AIS is a private, non-profit academic society founded in 1967 to support and promote scholarship and research on Iran and the Persianate world at the international level. As an independent, non-partisan, non-political, multidisciplinary international community, the association publishes *Iranian Studies*, the principal journal in the field. The Association's Committee on Academic Freedom has been following with grave concern the disturbing news about the mass toxic gas poisoning of schoolgirls in Iran.

The site of these dastardly attacks – educational facilities – is especially disconcerting given the long history of activism that was necessary to enable women's access to schools and universities in Iran. Last fall, when nationwide protests erupted against the morality police following the death, in police custody, of Jhina Mahsa Amini, many dissenting Iranian students and faculty confronted various forms of assault on their academic freedom in the Islamic Republic. Shortly thereafter, in November 2022, the poisoning of a girls' school in Qom came to light. According to the United Nations Office of the High [Commissioner](#), in response to these attacks, some parents opted not to send their daughters back to school out of fear for their safety. As reported by [state media](#) in the Islamic Republic, by March of 2023, more than 900 schoolgirls from about 60 schools had fallen ill from exposure to these suspicious chemical attacks. Human rights activists, however, have put the number of those affected at over [7,000](#).

Parents, teachers, and concerned citizens demonstrated outside of the regional offices of the Ministry of Education in major cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, Rasht, and Sanandaj, but some were repelled with tear gas and faced arrest. These poison attacks have caused physical symptoms that include respiratory distress, nausea, faintness, and fatigue. Although the

government has arrested over 100 suspects in these poison attacks, many unanswered questions remain, including how such attacks could have occurred repeatedly across the country. Many parents also have expressed distrust of the government's investigation, demanding transparency.

Women university students who demonstrated against the poisoning of girls' schools have faced intimidation and punishment. According to Iran's Student Union Council, scores of university students reported that they were barred from entering their campuses after participating in protests against the reported poison attacks on girls' schools. These included around 40 students at Tabriz University of Medical Sciences and 30 students at Tehran's Allameh University.

The recent troubling news that a new wave of chemical attacks in schools has taken place lends additional urgency to these contemptible developments. Amnesty International has stated that the rights of "millions of schoolgirls" to education is jeopardized because of these ongoing chemical attacks on educational facilities. Furthermore, the dismissal of these attacks as "stress," "excitement," and/or "mental contagion" flagrantly invokes age-old gender discrimination and mistreatment of women by denying them recognition of their legitimate concerns about their physical ailments.

The Islamic Republic cannot fulfill its promise of "free education" and "the facilitation and expansion of higher education," as mandated by Article 3 of its Constitution, if it cannot create a safe educational environment for young girls who aspire to become future university students. As a member state of the United Nations, as well as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child, Iran has a legal obligation to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation" and to "recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity." By depriving Iranian schoolgirls of a safe educational environment, and by interrogating or harassing university students and faculty who have protested against these chemical attacks, the Islamic Republic denies its citizens the right to academic freedom and the ability to pursue their educational objectives in an environment free of harm.

AIS-CAF calls on the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran to conduct an independent and transparent investigation of these poison attacks and to fulfill its international and humanitarian obligations by providing Iranian schoolgirls and university students with safe educational opportunities. We will continually monitor the situation on the ground in the hopes that these reprehensible attacks will end and that Iranian students of all ages will safely pursue their education without threat of violence or intimidation.