

Review

# Legitimizing Misogyny and Femicide: Legal Himpathy and (State) Violence against Women in Iran

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**Abstract:** On the fifth of February 2022, a man gruesomely murdered his seventeen-year-old wife, Mona Heydari, in a city in a southern province of Iran. The man then shocked bystanders by strolling in public spaces while carrying his wife's severed head. This paper focuses on the case of Mona's killing and investigates the state, media, and online user-created reactions to the incident. The paper aims to (i) offer an in-depth exploration of himpathy with the perpetrator and (ii) investigate the role of the law and the state in the normalization and perpetuation of violence committed by men against women in the name of 'honor.' This paper extends the usage of the concept of himpathy (by Manne, 2017) as a cluster of biases that direct sympathy towards men who commit violence against women to the institutional and legal realms. It also draws on the traditional notion of gheirat, referring to protecting one's 'honor,' and explores its role in Iranian law to show that the Iranian legal system hinges upon it, therefore legitimizing misogyny and femicide.

**Keywords:** femicide; gender; gheirat; himpathy; Iran; law; state violence; violence against women

## 1. Introduction

On the fifth of January 2022, a tragic incident occurred in Ahvaz, a city in the Southern Khuzestan province in Iran, where a man gruesomely murdered his seventeen-year-old wife. The man shocked bystanders by strolling in public spaces in the city with his wife's severed head in one hand and the machete he used to kill her in the other. The incident was covered on Farsi-language news media, and social media exploded with videos and pictures of the man's horrific walk around the city. One widely circulated photo displayed the perpetrator, a barefoot young man standing in the heart of an urban setting. He seemed to be smiling and striking a pose for the camera. The image was slightly edited, with the victim's head blurred out in most images online. The victim was identified as Mona (Ghazal) Heydari, a seventeen-year-old girl from an ethnic Arab family in the city of Ahvaz, also the perpetrator's wife and cousin.

Mona Heydari was a victim of child marriage before becoming a victim of uxoricide (i.e., the killing of one's wife). Different media sources have cited twelve or fifteen years old as Mona's potential age of marriage [1,2]. Mona's family confirmed that she was too young to legally marry. The minimum age of marriage for girls in Iran is thirteen years old, thus substantiating the possibility that she could have been twelve years old when she was married. Her father/family had to obtain approval from a court (the marriage law in Iran will be addressed in the next sections) to marry Mona to her cousin [3]. Mona's father also confirmed that Mona and the perpetrator, Sajjad, had a troubled relationship and marital problems that led Mona to flee to her parental home multiple times, only to be returned to her husband's home by his parents. Mona was seventeen and had a three-year-old son with the perpetrator when she fled to Türkiye. It is alleged that Mona had extramarital relations with a Syrian man in Türkiye and that she terminated a second pregnancy from Sajjad during her escape. It is unclear how Mona decided to return to Iran, but it is reported that she was compelled to return to her husband and son by her father/family, only to be murdered by her husband soon after. Sajjad was reportedly twenty-one years old at the



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time of the murder and was assisted by his brother, who allegedly held Mona while Sajjad attacked her [2,4].

This paper focuses on Mona Heydari's uxoricide. The goal is to (i) offer an in-depth exploration of himpathy with the perpetrator in online public reactions and (ii) investigate the role of the law and state in the normalization and perpetuation of violence committed by men against women in the name of 'honor'. This paper makes both an empirical and a conceptual contribution to understanding State violence in Iran by using two notions. The first is *himpathy*, coined by Kate Manne, which describes the tendency to disproportionately sympathize with male perpetrators of violence against women (VAW). This notion will be extended to Iran's institutional and legal realms. The second term is *gheirat*, an influential notion—that has sometimes been (mis)translated to 'honor'—referring to the patriarchal protective and possessive attitudes one (most often a man) is socialized with and expected to demonstrate toward their kin (most commonly the female relatives).

In what follows, the paper first sets forth the history of VAW and its legal/institutional status in Iran after the foundation of the current Iranian State (The Islamic Republic of Iran) in 1979. It will then shortly present the notion of himpathy and the legal-cultural framework of *gheirat* and how the two interact in public and official reactions to Mona's killing as well as in the law. The paper will then present the findings on himpathy in official reactions in the media and users' online reactions before turning to institutionalized himpathy in the Iranian penal code. The discussion will make a case for considering legal and institutionalized himpathy as state violence.

## 2. VAW and Its Status in Iran after 1979: A Short Overview

Founded in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is one of only six United Nations member states that have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) [5]. Shortly after its establishment, the newly formed Islamic State revoked the Family Protection Laws introduced by the preceding Pahlavi regime, which aimed to enhance women's rights in areas such as divorce and child custody, among others. While discussing the Pahlavi legal reforms is beyond the capacity of this paper, it is notable that although these pre-IRI reforms were not explicitly aimed at tackling gender-based violence, they did lessen the relative vulnerability of women to violence, especially in the domestic sphere, to some extent. The new Islamic regime's ideological stance toward gender and women's role in society led to new laws that drew heavily from a specific strand of Islamic Shi'i jurisprudence. Certain new laws have contributed to, if not directly exacerbated, VAW in Iran [6].

Following arduous years of debate and campaigning by Iranian women's rights activists, the Iranian Parliament passed a bill to join CEDAW in May 2003, but the conservative block in the government rallied a push against the bill and successfully barred it [7]. The lack of recognition and action against VAW can be associated with the conservative ruling political powers in the country who do not believe that the definition of violence by CEDAW is compatible with the country's institutionalized ideological standpoints based on a very specific interpretation of Shi'a Islam [8]. In fact, the national legislation enshrines many barriers to accessing fundamental rights in areas such as employment, marriage, and citizenship for women [5]. The political activism to recognize VAW has continued ever since, and in 2021, a new bill on the elimination of VAW was again proposed but has remained disputed in the Parliament to this date.

Therefore, VAW still has a legally unrecognized status in the country. This does not mean that VAW is never punished, but it does mean that it has not been given a special legal status [8]. By not recognizing VAW, Iranian authorities implicitly claim gender neutrality in treating perpetrators and victims. The absence of recognition also results in infrequent reporting of VAW, especially domestic abuse, despite its frequent occurrence, as institutional support for affected women is limited [9]. Because of its unrecognized status, no individual legal and policy units or official national statistics are available on VAW, such as lifetime or yearly physical and/or sexual violence, intimate partner violence, or

non-partner sexual violence [10]. The existing numbers reported by government officials are widely believed to be inaccurate due to the lack of proper registration mechanisms for interpersonal violence [11].

The absence of formal legal acknowledgment has not prevented violence against women (VAW) from being examined in academic, civic, political, and public discussions. In particular, domestic violence has garnered significant scholarly and public focus. Academic research has also devoted considerable attention to VAW. Studies by prominent Iranian researchers such as sociologist Shahla Ezazi and legal scholar Mehangiz Kar have inspired interest in the new generations of scholars and formed a vast body of work on VAW in Iran, e.g., [12,13]. The number of master's and doctorate-level dissertations written on women's issues, including VAW, has been so overwhelming that universities discourage students from researching the topic, especially since the findings and policy implications on such topics are rarely taken up by authorities [14] (p.3).

In the context of research on violence against women in Iran, scholar Shahla Ezazi points out that the focus has largely been on individual factors and interpersonal relationships as the root causes of such violence [15]. This approach that depoliticizes the discourses around VAW in Iran is a survival strategy that partially results from the pressure on academics, activists, and civil society to stay seemingly apolitical (for risks to academic freedom, see *Nature*, 'Academia at risk,' [16]), as a result of which, researchers often use individualized and family-oriented frameworks of analysis in discussing VAW. Studies frequently identify a correlation between social factors such as addiction, unemployment, and lower levels of education with VAW. This angle enables researchers to engage with the pressing issue of VAW while steering clear of state-defined boundaries or 'red lines.'

While organized activism against VAW in Iran has remained risky, the atmosphere of risk and fear has given rise to different forms of implicit and grassroots activism. Implicit activism is forms of resistance and disobedience that make a societal impact but lack the often-expected loud public outreach [17] and are common in countries where political or human rights activism bears substantial risks. Social media and #metoo activism have been grassroots initiatives that rely mostly on ordinary Iranians [18]. VAW is also a topic often addressed in popular culture. While the exclusively state-run Iranian TV mostly offers homogeneous and traditionalist imagery of women in the form of stereotypical and archetypal characters, Iranian cinema has specifically shown great interest in social issues, including the problem of VAW and different gender-based discriminations, and has featured these topics in many productions. Besides these implicit forms of activism, explicit activism against VAW has been part of the Iranian women's movement's agenda but has remained somewhat unorganized. Operating primarily in a decentralized fashion, the Iranian women's movement has attempted to make itself less susceptible to targeted attacks and suppression [19]. VAW is still a highly sensitive and over-politicized topic.

The Iranian state has been widely accused of perpetuating gender-based violence by its citizens. The compulsory veiling mandate and its implementation is a dominant source of VAW through its enactment and militarized implementation by government authorities. Iranian law has legalized child marriage, which disproportionately impacts young girls such as Mona, who can be married off by their legal guardians even before they turn thirteen (the legal minimum age of marriage for girls) if a court approves their physical maturity [17]. State officials and authorities are also perceived as producers of problematic gender discourses, which have directly and indirectly contributed to vigilante and police VAW [20–22].

Following the aggravation of violence after the 2022 protests called the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' uprising, a Resolution to expel the Iranian state from the UN Women's Commission was posted on Change.org by United Nations Watch, a Swiss non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), calling for that body to expel the Islamic Republic of Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The petition received over 141,000 signatures. While VAW requires extensive social and cultural reform, there seems to be a growing consensus

among women's rights activists in Iran that one of the most prominent obstacles against progress in this domain is presented by the conservative forces within the Iranian state.

### 3. Himpathy and Gheirat

Himpathy is a term coined by philosopher Kate Manne, referring to the excessive sympathy shown toward male perpetrators of violence [23]. Manne argues that when the perpetrator is sympathized with, he is effectively made into the victim of his own crimes, reversing the roles and leading to victim blaming. This sympathy is expressed, for instance, when allegations of sexual assault are made against men. What often follows such allegations is an expression of concern and sympathy with men. The concern is often in the form of preoccupation about what happens to men's reputations, the impact that the allegations have on their families, and how their lives are changed because of such allegations. The level of himpathy is impacted by the perpetrator's social status and capital. Himpathy, as widespread sympathy toward male perpetrators, has been employed to explain the fixation on the perpetrators' fall from grace, for instance, in the case of celebrities and media personalities [24]. One study argues that academics and surgeons who commit sexual misconduct often garner considerable himpathy because of the perceived importance of their work and their many powerful connections [25]. Manne argues that himpathy owes and contributes to a tendency to let historically dominant agents get away with violence vis à vis their historical subordinates. Himpathy, therefore, is a symptom of gendered structures of power and, hence, not just isolated to specific cultures.

It is argued that himpathy, in the context of Iran, is sometimes expressed in the cases that have been widely categorized as 'honor-related' violence perpetrated by men, including femicides and uxoricides known as 'honor killing.' There have been debates over the term femicide and the difficulties in establishing a common agreed-upon definition. In this paper, the definition offered by Grzyb, Naudi, and Marcuello-Servós (2018) is used that defines femicide as the killing of women because they are women, emphasizing the role that their gender plays in making them vulnerable to such extreme manifestation of VAW that happens globally [26]. When himpathy is shown, it is directed to the man whose 'honor' was jeopardized by a woman, often his relative. The word honor, however, does not do justice to the complexity of cultural and social frameworks and individual feelings of shame, ownership, and entitlement that are relevant in the Iranian context. While some scholars continue to use the term honor to address this type of crime, this paper will avoid using it and will instead use the notion of *gheirat*, the patriarchal entitlement to control women's lives and bodies.

Gheirat is a Farsi/Arabic word. The Dehkhodā Farsi dictionary defines it as 'protection and defense of chastity, dignity, honor, and preservation of esteem.' It is often employed in relation to protecting all that has to do with one's honor, including one's homeland, religion, and kin. It is also, in general—although not ubiquitously—used as a gendered term, describing only men's sense of protection, particularly when referring to protecting one's female kin (and one's homeland/nation, which is also feminized). In this case, it is translatable to men's sense of patriarchal honor. The word, when used in kinship relations, is most commonly employed in familial contexts, predominantly referring to (grand)fathers', brothers', uncles', and husbands' sense of patriarchal honor toward their respective (grand)daughters, sisters, nieces, and wives.

According to Tizro (2013), gheirat is the protective and possessive shield constructed around women perceived to carry and personify men's patriarchal honor [27]. Gheirat justifies the passionate and aggressive defense of that patriarchal honor and obliges and entitles men to control women's bodies, mobility, and behavior. Traditionally, Iranian men could be blamed for lacking gheirat if their *naamous* (women kin associated with them) were involved in a sexually laden relationship with a person outside of marriage, as the men were socio-religiously considered responsible for protecting and controlling women kin [28]. A woman who does not observe the assumed 'honorable' codes is punished by the men with whom she is associated.

Gheirat is often the underlying force that inspires the harm and the killing of a woman who has supposedly gone astray. It is, therefore, a combination of a man's internalized extreme sense of patriarchal control (i.e., the micro-level individual factor) and fear of being shamed by society (i.e., the meso-level community factor). The loss of control over the woman for whom one is responsible is a burden of shame so big that it can feel like the loss of life in the symbolic sense, and since the man lives for this honor, he has to restore it [29]. The honor is supposedly restored by retaliating against the source of the shame: the unruly woman. In the case of Mona Heydari, the perpetrator's mother confirmed that gheirat was supposedly (one of) the reason(s) behind the killing. According to her, her son carried the victim's head on the streets and in the neighborhood where he had been bullied for the shame his wife had brought to him; he did so to publicly state that he did not lack gheirat and to reclaim his 'honor' in his community [30].

Mona Heydari's story is not an isolated incident. In the past few years, multiple similarly violent gheirat-related femicides and uxoricides occurred. On the twentieth of May 2020, Romina Ashrafi, a fourteen-year-old Iranian girl, was decapitated by her father with a sickle; the father cited his motive as clearing his 'honor.' On the fourteenth of June 2020, Fatemeh Farahi, who was nineteen years old, was decapitated by her husband (also her cousin) because of bringing 'shame' upon her family by escaping from the marital home. One day later, on the fifteenth of June, twenty-two-year-old Reyhaneh Ameri was killed by her father, allegedly because of publishing personal pictures on social media. Mobina Soori, a sixteen-year-old girl, was suffocated by her husband on the thirtieth of August 2021. The husband had suspected Mobina had had an extramarital affair. The growing number of mediatized incidents does not necessarily indicate the rise in the number of gheirat-related killings but a shift in how such incidents leak into the public space, partly due to the widespread usage of smartphones and social media that compel authorities to address such incidents. While these cases were mediatized, many other cases of VAW—from femicide to battering and (sexual) abuse—remain under the radar.

#### 4. Methods

This paper used media research and (media) content analysis of online user comments to explore the state, media, and online users' reactions to the case of Mona Heydari's killing. The author initially became aware of Mona's femicide on the day it occurred in Iran, diligently perusing various news outlets and subsequently following discussions on social media platforms, notably Twitter. Initial annotations pertinent to this paper were made on that same day. Subsequent monitoring of online dialogues continued to inform the research. A systematic review of responses from state officials was also undertaken, focusing particularly on Iranian news media in the Farsi language.

For the purpose of this research, two sources of data were used, namely, the content of media pieces as well as the comments left under the media pieces by users. To sample media pieces, two groups of news channels were explored: (i) Farsi language online news agencies and magazines approved by the Iranian state, including Tabnak, AsIran, Farsnews, Etemad Online, Eghtesad News, Eshragh News, Donya-e-eqtesad, Fararu, Balatarin, Vokalapress, Asianews, Rouydad24, Hamshahrionline, Faraz daily, Bartarinha, and Rooziato; (ii) international media including the BBC, Daily Mirror, and Al-Arabiya, as well as the diasporic Farsi news agencies Radiozamaneh, Radio Farda, Iran International, and IranWire, as well as video-sharing platforms YouTube and Aparat (the Persian language alternative for YouTube).

To find news pieces, Google was used, and search terms such as 'Mona Heydari,' 'Ghazal Heydari,' and 'Mona Heydari's murder' were employed to look for news and opinion pieces about the case. The search results included tens of media pieces: news media, personal blogs, online forums, and chat groups. Iran practices widespread news filtering and cyberspace control and limits access to news published by Western news agencies. This means that only the first groups of news channels (discussed above) are accessible to Iranians living inside the country, and the latter group mostly targets the



Farsi-speaking Iranian diasporic populations living predominantly in Europe and North America. To present a realistic perspective of Iranians living in Iran, only Farsi-language user comments posted on news websites of the first group were analyzed for this study. Selected Farsi comments were translated into English by the author.

Four media reports and one YouTube video were selected for the content analysis of users' comments. These included articles on Asianews, Rouydad24, Faraz daily, and Rooziato, as well as one video produced by an independent YouTube channel. The publication dates of the contents on these five platforms ranged from the eighth of February 2022 to the eighteenth of January 2023. All five used sources allowed user comments to be added under their content. A total of 800 comments were collected from the five selected sources. These comments appeared beneath the articles and the YouTube video reporting on the killing of Mona Heydari.

A content analysis was conducted on the comments to uncover indications and perspectives concerning empathy and gheirat. Unlike social media comments almost always traceable to a specific personal or business profile that can be accessed publicly, comments left on news pages are not connected to personal profiles. Most users only used (made-up) personal names and aliases without any descriptors that could lead to their identity. This makes the process of anonymization easier but has the disadvantage of not giving the researcher much information about the user's background and social markers, such as gender, which would be relevant for this study. Because of this, conducting a gendered analysis of user behavior was impossible. The paper has, however, mentioned the gender of the aliases and users' names when relevant.

## 5. Online Reactions to Mona's Murder

Many users commenting under news pieces on Mona Heydari's murder expressed disgust, anger, and frustration toward Sajjad, the perpetrator. 'How could one commit such an atrocious crime and then smile at a camera? What type of animosity is this?' asked an online user on one of the Farsi news websites that featured the news with an image of Sajjad, seemingly smiling. 'What grave injustice! I am lost for words,' wrote another user. Many users compared the killing of Mona Heydari to ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) beheadings of soldiers, journalists, and aid workers and called Sajjad 'daeshi,' meaning someone who is associated with ISIL (Daesh is the Arabic acronym for ISIL).

Other users connected Mona's killing to her having been a child bride (as discussed before, she was potentially married to Sajjad when she was twelve). One user stated, 'The real criminals are her parents, who sent a child, who should have been playing or going to school, to her husband's house.' Others blamed the Iranian law and the state for promoting child marriage. One user said 'I am disgraced with our country's laws; a twelve-year-old girl is not ready for marriage. Such a girl, when she grows up, would, of course, want to experience life anew,' explaining why they thought Mona fled to Türkiye.

Other users blamed the government for the poverty in the region where the femicide took place, prayed for Mona's soul, or condemned the heinous crime. Some users pointed to the lack of legal protection for girls and women in Iran, which led to domestic violence, and blamed the state for its occurrence. One user wrote:

'Of course, with the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran that holds backward views and treats women, who make up half of the society, like tools and commodities, one can't expect more. Unfortunately, countries like Iran are still severely lagging in this regard'—an anonymous online user.

Among the comments that condemned Mona's killing, the presence of racism against Arab minorities (known as Arabophobia) was also observed. Many users associated gheirat with Arabness and used derogatory language to refer to Arabs. Comments such as 'let's deport Arabs to Iraq,' and 'fuck every Arab's mother' were posted online.

The manifestation of Arabophobia in the comments was twofold: firstly, it was invoked to assert that Mona was a casualty of an Arab culture that perpetuates VAW and misogyny; secondly, it was utilized to blame Mona for forsaking her Iranian partner in favor of an

Arab Syrian individual. The comments referred not only to Mona's ethnic background but also to the geopolitics of the Khuzestan province of Iran, home to a large ethnic Arab Iranian population. Arabs are estimated to comprise between two and four percent of Iran's eighty-four million people, but Arabs account for most of Khuzestan province's population [31]. Such Arabophobic sentiments in Iran have a longer history than the Islamic Republic of Iran but are worsened by both Pahlavi's and the Islamic Republic's Persian-centric and Persian-Shi'a nationalist political tendencies [32].

Despite the general public's empathy and mourning for Mona, not every reaction was empathetic with the victim. The empathy with Mona Heydari's murderer was not widespread. Nonetheless, the empathy was represented in different shapes and on various levels in the user comments. While it is impossible to determine users' gender based on their comments under news items (unlike social media, these comments are not connected to profiles where people potentially declare their gender identification), online comments sympathizing with the perpetrator that were detected online were either by users using male Farsi/Arabic names or anonymous posts. 'It is the woman who left his husband's home without permission and committed adultery,' said one user, 'so let's all consider the man's feelings too. He snapped.' This comment serves as an illustration of the form of empathy extended to the perpetrator, framing the femicide as a transient lapse in self-control by a victimized male.

While fewer users directly justified the killing, a larger number were hesitant to condemn the killing, mentioning that Mona Heydari had fled to Türkiye and allegedly had extramarital relationships. According to these users, the perpetrator's *gheirat* and the distress experienced because of knowing of his wife's extramarital affairs must be taken into consideration:

'The laws regarding adultery... need to be revised and made more severe. If Mona's husband, with all the emotional distress and humiliation he suffered, wanted to take legal action, he would have had to bring four male witnesses from Türkiye who would testify to adultery, which was impossible. As a result, his wife would have received, at most, ninety-nine lashes. If lawmakers properly punish an adulterous married individual, then there would be no need to punish anyone else'—anonymous online user with a male username.

The user refers to Iran's 'adultery' law, in which, according to Article 225 of the Iranian Penal Code, the punishment for adultery—when committed by a married man and a married woman—is stoning or execution. But if it is not possible to prove the act of adultery (extramarital sex), then the accused is condemned to one hundred lashes for having had extramarital relations. The user considers one hundred lashes an inadequate form of punishment for adultery, and by suggesting that finding witnesses would be difficult, he connotes that he finds the death penalty a more suitable punishment.

Another user evokes a sense of patriarchal jealousy by depicting the imagery of a woman cheating:

'Sajjad's act is a crime; however, no one can place themselves in the situation of a man consumed by *gheirat*. . . Just imagine receiving pictures of your wife with her boyfriend for four months, and day and night, you think that your wife has slept in the arms of a stranger. For four months, with this thought that your wife is naked in the arms of another man. . . the girl's mistake was greater than her husband's'—an anonymous online user.

The emphasis on the mental image of a woman 'naked' and 'in the arms' of another man is put to justify *gheirat*. But while these comments sympathized with Sajjad, they did not go so far as to condone the killing. There were, however, comments that went further. One user suggested:

'It is just that her head was severed; God willing, she will go to hell, this filthy girl. Bravo to Sajjad for his *gheirat*. If she was a decent person, she would not have left her three-year-old child for a stranger man. She had another baby on the

way, which she aborted. Damn you [Mona]! Sajjad did right by you. This is the appropriate punishment for any girl who betrays her husband’—an anonymous online user.

In this line, some comments suggested Sajjad should have gone further in his violence toward Mona; two users suggested ‘cutting [her] to pieces’ would have been a suitable reaction by Sajjad. Therefore, the killing was interpreted as a just response and a good lesson for other women who entertain the idea of cheating on their husbands. Another user wrote:

‘...with her actions, this woman has made it so that Iranian men can no longer trust even their own cousin as a wife, which is very bad. If the Islamic government executes this man, it would be supporting wives’ betrayal of their husbands, thereby weakening the foundation of families and promoting loose and promiscuous behavior’—an anonymous online user.

The comments show that Mona’s escape and extramarital affair, as well as her murder, were seen as examples set for husbands and wives, and, hence, the state’s response to the murder was interpreted not merely as a punitive measure but also one that would have greater implications for families. These public reactions—whether condemning or condoning the violence—highlight the significance of the official response to the incident, which will be addressed in the following section.

## 6. Himpathy in Official Reactions and in Law

The murder of Mona incited some reactions from state officials in Iran. One of the first reactions was regarding the online circulation of the images of Sajjad carrying around Mona’s severed head on social media. The head of the Khuzestan province cyber-police division reacted one day after the incident, not to the incident itself, but to the circulation of the images and videos of the perpetrator threatening those posting on social media of prosecution for disturbing public order [33]. This was followed by a statement by the official spokesperson of the Judicial system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who emphasized that cyberspace will be monitored and further threatened that not only users but also official media in the country that were posting images that ‘upset the public sentiments will face legal retaliation [34]. With the rise of social media in Iran and the widespread usage of smartphones, public incidents are increasingly recorded and shared online, sometimes even before traditional and official news media report them. This has led to the democratization of the circulation of information as the state prefers to keep such matters under the radar to maintain the appearance of safety and order in the country but cannot control all means of dissemination of news and suppress them.

There were immediate reactions from women politicians who have been advocating for the new bill on the elimination of VAW (discussed above), such as Azar Mansouri, a reformist politician, who posted on her personal social media about the urgency of passing the bill that protects women [35]. The connection between legal gaps and Mona’s case was soon denied by conservative politicians in power. Hossein Hatami, a member of the Social Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Iranian Parliament), downplayed the importance of stating ‘there are no legal vacuums in discussions of violence against women,’ adding ‘these [types of incidents] happen once in a while in society, and they are not new things’ [36].

Among other state officials, Iran’s Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri’s comments on Mona’s murder stood out as they deflected the blame from Sajjad if not directly sympathizing with him. Montazeri, who is also a Shi’a cleric, stated:

‘The enemies of the system utilize all their means in the fierce war to overcome the regime. In their path of soft warfare, the enemy employs the most advanced tools and equipment to achieve victory. Virtual spaces are one of the enemy’s most significant and prominent tools to undermine the regime. Inappropriate uses of cyberspace are employed to erode the foundations of Islamic culture



and the opposing values upheld by families. . . . a few days ago, a gruesome incident occurred in one of the squares of Ahvaz, carried out by the spouse of a woman. The primary basis of this incident traces back to the virtual space. The story unfolds as follows: the Syrian individual deceives a woman on Instagram, then travels to Türkiye after a while, taking pictures and videos there, which are then sent to their spouse through Instagram. Eventually, the woman returned to the country, and this very virtual space incited the spouse to commit the act of severing the head of the Ahvazi woman.’ (Excerpt from [37])

In this comment, Montazeri blames social media and supposedly intentional cyberwarfare by the country’s ‘enemies’ for disturbing Islamic and family values in Iran. Montazeri then contextualizes the murder by rendering ‘the Syrian individual’ and digital media as the source of the problem. This discursively shifts the attention from Iranian society, the laws, and Sajjad to foreign actors to the extent that the murder appears as a natural consequence of the chain of events.

Scapegoating and blaming foreign (often Western) enemies have been a political strategy used by the Iranian state since 1979. The notion of ‘the enemy [of the Islamic state]’ has often been used by Iranian authorities as a politically motivated rhetorical strategy to influence and unite the masses against the threats from several imagined, ill-defined, and shifting adversarial forces to scapegoat and distract the public from the country’s numerous distressing social problems, which are precisely rooted in the totalitarian nature of the theocratic government [38].

Unlike those of the public, the official reactions remained silent about Mona’s age and how the legalization of child marriage is by itself VAW [39] and contributes to other forms of VAW. In fact, the only official reaction came from Ali Asgar Annabestani, a conservative member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Iranian Parliament), who said ‘The murder of Mona Heydari has nothing to do with child marriage. We should not associate all these things with each other’ [40]. The legal age of marriage is thirteen for girls in Iran; however, a clause is attached to the law that allows girls to get married earlier if the girl’s guardian (the father and/or grandfather) and an Islamic court approve the girl’s (physical) readiness for marriage. This clause has made the application of the law regarding the minimum age of marriage (which is already highly problematic) arbitrary. Child marriages are reported to be most common in the country’s religious regions where strict patriarchal social attitudes might be dominant, especially in some areas in the Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, Khorasan, and Khuzestan provinces [41]; the latter is the province where Mona Heydari’s femicide took place.

In another expression of himpathy, Ahmad Rahdar, a Shi’a cleric and head of the Fotooh Andisheh Institute of Islamic Studies and Research, centered his reaction to the incident around the importance of gheirat and stated:

‘In this case, (the murder of Mona Heydari), an Iranian man has been subjected to injustice and made to act out of the ordinary, driven by his sense of gheirat. He may have made mistakes in how he acted upon his sense of gheirat; nevertheless, the fundamental issue is the existence of gheirat. It is stated in religious narratives that gheirat is one of the manifestations of faith, and God also loves a devoted servant. Of course, some narratives indicate that God does not like certain types of gheirat. When it comes to this unfortunate incident of which none of us are happy, we should be aware not to act in a way that damages or destroys the essence of gheirat. Today, the enemy is attempting to undermine the concept of gheirat, and our media should respond indirectly and directly in a way that reverses the response’ [42].

Rahdar’s statement did not directly reference the victim; instead, it praised the violent killer’s gheirat and sympathized with him for being subjected to ‘injustice,’ referring to Mona’s escape with the Syrian man and the alleged photos he sent to the perpetrator as the main problems. We see the appearance of the supposed ‘enemy’ that was discussed

above in Rahdar's comment again, similar to Montazeri's. While politically and culturally significant, the state officials' discursive constructions of the perpetrator and the victim do not necessarily reflect the legal frameworks that address femicide. The legal viewpoint and its treatment of femicide perpetrators warrant individual consideration and will be examined separately.

Among the comments accusing Sajjad and mourning the brutal murder of Mona, even those who criticized the state, the presence of support for the death penalty was rampant. Many users asked the authorities to execute Sajjad swiftly and publicly to send a message to other potential perpetrators. The public's expectation is more or less aligned with the law, as in the Penal Code of Iran, which is based on a specific interpretation of Shi'i Shari'a law in which the crime of intentional murder of a Muslim person (regardless of their gender) is by default punished by the death penalty. Article 381 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran (translated verbatim from Farsi by the author) has provisioned 'retribution' (i.e., the retaliatory killing of the perpetrator) as the punishment for murder intentionally committed by an adult. The Article states:

'The punishment for intentional murder, if requested by the blood guardian (*Wali-e-dam*) and subject to other conditions specified in the law, is retribution. Otherwise, it is determined based on the provisions of other articles of this law regarding blood money (*Diyeh*) and discretionary punishment (*Ta'zir*; i.e., the punishment that can be adjusted according to the discretion of the judge).'

According to this Article, in the case of intentional killing, if the blood guardian—the person who has the right to demand retribution or to pardon in the event of a homicide—demands it, then retribution will take place. If the blood guardian decides to pardon the killer, then the killer must pay blood money, which is a form of monetary compensation for the unlawful killing that is paid to the blood guardian. Besides the above general Article that addresses all types of homicide, there is also a specific article that directly addresses uxoricide. Article 630 of the Islamic Penal Code (translated verbatim from Farsi by the author) states:

'If a man witnesses his wife in the act of adultery with another man and has knowledge of her consent, he has the right to immediately kill them both. However, only the man can be killed if the woman is coerced or forced.'

According to this Article, uxoricide is considered rightful killing if the husband knows and can prove that his wife has been 'adulterous.' It is noteworthy that this exception—the right to kill—is granted to the man to kill his wife if he is certain that the wife has consented to extramarital sex; there is no such exception made for women who witness their husbands' extramarital sex. The husband's bruised sense of patriarchal 'honor' is therefore institutionalized and protected at the cost of a woman's safety and life.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions: Himpathy and State Violence

This paper used (media) content analysis to investigate the state, media, and online user reactions to the incident. Multiple news media pieces accessible to the Iranian public were investigated, and both the content of the pieces and the reader comments underneath them were analyzed. The paper showed that most readers condemned the brutal killing of Mona Heydari and that their himpathy with Sajjad, the killer, was not widespread. Nonetheless, himpathy was represented in many comments, and while not all those sympathizing with Sajjad directly supported murdering 'adulterous' women, many hesitated to condemn the killing on the grounds that Sajjad's bruised gheirat should be taken into consideration. Gheirat occupied an important place in sympathizing with Sajjad, as many sympathetic comments by online users either used the term and/or referred to the damage caused to the husband's honor as reasons for showing sympathy with him.

Himpathy, as Manne describes it, draws on a cluster of moral biases—in this case, the husband's exclusive right to his wife's body and sex, and, to some extent, her life as well—that take away sympathy that should be directed toward the victimized woman and shift it higher up the social hierarchy toward men. On this account, himpathy obscures

other potentially damaging forms of misogyny—by placing disproportionate emphasis on the actions of the woman, it detracts from the actions of the abuser [23], rendering him the true victim of the whole ordeal.

While public reactions were largely condemnatory, the official reactions were mixed. A group of reformist activists and politicians who had already been vocal about VAW seized this opportunity to emphasize the legal protection gap for male violence victims in Iran, demanding a change in the state's attitude toward VAW. Most official statements, however, focused on scapegoating and evading direct engagement with the incident, calling it a 'family dispute' and denying the existence of a structural problem with legislation against VAW. Moreover, the paper demonstrated—using examples of discourses used by officials as well as legal codes in the Islamic Penal Code of Iran—that not only is VAW not adequately addressed, but there is institutionalized himpathy with men whose gheirat has been undermined by an 'adulterous' wife.

Both himpathy and the patriarchal notion of gheirat exist parallelly because of the prevalence of a sex-based ideology that places women within the lower value bracket in an assumed hierarchy. It is important to emphasize that in no way did the author intend to give the impression that femicide and VAW are culturally condoned in Iran, nor that similar forms of discourses do not exist in other countries and contexts across the globe. The notion of gheirat has been used to make a contextualized argument for the legitimization of (state) VAW in Iran. In fact, as the paper's findings showed, many users referred to the state and the existence of discriminatory laws (such as the law regarding uxoricide discussed above) as the reason why violent violence incidents such as Mona's femicide still happen in Iran. This case also shows the deep gap between the state and the people of Iran that has deepened even more in recent decades because of rapid globalization [43].

The author's intention in this paper, by referring to the public's advocacy in favor of the death penalty and making comparisons between laws for men and women, has not been to argue in favor of harsher carceral punishments for perpetrators of violence against women or make a case for the death penalty (the author is against both). The author agrees with the critique of carceral feminism put forth by Amia Srinivisan (2021) in *The Right To Sex*. Srinivisan (2021) is critical of the faith that some strands of feminism have in the 'coercive power of' the state and law to control violence perpetrated by men toward women. She argues that state measures—that are often punitive—may offer temporary relief but have other adverse consequences because of not focusing on the real problems (e.g., lack of education) and do not have a long-term positive impact on a culture that allows for misogyny and violence to flourish [44]. The research has, instead, intended to show how males and females have been valued and treated differently in the Penal Code, in a way that a husband's sense of patriarchal honor is given priority over his wife's life.

While the author agrees with Srinivisan's arguments against carceral solutions, at the same time, one could argue that it is unrealistic to advocate for changing Iranian society through mere education without appealing to legal frameworks, especially in a legal context so deeply hostile to women. The existing activist and political attempts to propose new laws to protect women from violence are well intended, and some laws, including Article 630 of the Islamic Penal Code (explained above) and Article 1041 of the Civil Code on the legal age of marriage for girls, are in dire need of reform. But Srinivisan's (2021) argument is even more applicable to the case of Iran because of the state's intrusive and undemocratic attitudes. Promoting state intervention would lead to further violence in a country that is not shy of lashing, (publicly) hanging, and stoning its 'criminals.' This leaves us with a dilemma: if appealing to the legal institution is not the best option, and fundamental change (in the form of a regime change) is not available (at least in the short run), then how can the issue of VAW be tackled?

It is beyond the capacity of this paper to solve this dilemma, but there is a newly spreading pessimism (or realism) of legal reform that marks an important shift in public political opinion. The early optimism of feminist scholars advocating for change in Iran by appealing to religious and political authorities (such as [19,45]) has been recently replaced

by the view that the Iranian state is not a reliable source of justice; instead, it is the main perpetrator and facilitator of violence across the society. Although earlier proponents of the latter, such as Mojab (2001), had already argued for the failure of legal reform in Iran, this view became further popularized after the 2022 ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’—the large-scale anti-regime uprising with women’s rights at the forefront of its demands—erupted in Iran [46].

Returning to Mona’s case, one can argue that marrying her to her killer was made possible because of the sanctioning of child marriage and the level of power given to the father in Iranian law; her continuous suffering in her marital home was caused by a lack of institutional support and state institutions that protect victims of VAW; and her killing was made possible by the lack of legal protection for women whose wellbeing and lives are severely at risk—all of which are failures of the Iranian state in protecting children, women, and other marginalized groups, and are direct results of its gender and sexual politics. Moreover, while in recent decades, some changes in Iranian law have (marginally) improved women’s lives, the legal system does not demonstrate a great deal of potential for change (the fate of the new bill on eliminating VAW, discussed at the beginning of this paper, is a case in point).

To conclude, this paper argues that interpersonal gendered violence in Iran, especially violence perpetrated by men against women, can only be understood in relation to the Iranian law and the state’s attitude to gender. As the findings showed in the case of uxoricide motivated by gheirat, the Iranian state’s gender and sexual politics not only tolerate but also directly condone misogyny and violence. The fact that the traditional notion of gheirat presented in official state discourse, legitimate violence, and legal discourse perpetuates himpathy with a man whose gheirat is undermined facilitates tragedies such as Mona Heydari’s killing.

An observation that did not fall within the analytical scope of this paper and requires further attention was the rampant presence of sentiments in favor of the death penalty in the comments. Many users who condemned Mona’s killing did not hesitate to advocate the death penalty for her femicide. Iran has one of the highest numbers of executions in the world; there is concern over the growing number and the practice of public executions [47,48]. This implies that public executions by hanging are occasionally witnessed by onlookers. While it is possible to theorize that the prevalence of executions and the public nature of the hangings may have desensitized the public, there are no reliable statistics regarding the extent of public support for capital punishment.

This study’s contribution has been both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, this paper has shown how himpathy manifests itself in Iran’s cultural repertoires and legal-political discourses. Theoretically, the paper demonstrates that as long as gheirat serves as the legal prism for assessing male violence against familial intimates, the expression of himpathy toward the male perpetrator becomes inescapable. This study additionally indicated that while gheirat, as a cultural repertoire, is present in public opinion, it is not widely upheld to justify VAW. In fact, quite the opposite was found: the majority of users consider gheirat’s usage in this way highly troubling and unacceptable.

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