Arrests and TV confessions as Iran cracks down on women’s ‘improper’ clothing

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There were protests and condemnation last week after an Iranian woman who was arrested for defying newly hardened hijab laws appeared on state television to give what observers claimed was a forced confession as a result of torture.

Sepideh Rashno, 28, was arrested in July soon after footage of her being harassed on a bus over “improper clothing”, was circulated online.

Rashno, a writer and artist, is among [a number of women](https://abcnews.go.com/International/iranian-women-arrested-protesting-hijabs-make-forced-confessions/story?id=86727468) arrested after the introduction of a national “Hijab and Chastity Day” on 12 July.

According to the [Hrana human rights group](https://www.en-hrana.org/sepideh-rashno-hospitalized-prior-to-forced-tv-confession/), she was taken to hospital with internal bleeding shortly after her arrest and before her appearance on television.

Iranian women have been required to wear the hijab in public since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but president Ebrahim Raisi [signed an order](https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-women-dress-restrictions-raisi/31989759.html) on 15 August to enforce the country’s dress code law with a new list of restrictions.

According to Hrana, which says forced confessions are on the rise in Iran, five women were arrested for not observing the dress code, and four were forced to confess, in the days before and after 12 July.

They also reported that three women were arrested for dancing in public, 33 hairdressing salons were shut down and 1,700 people were summoned to law enforcement centres for reasons related to the hijab.

After her arrest, Rashno appeared on state television on 30 July, wearing a headscarf, to give an apology. In the footage, Rashno looks pale and subdued, and has dark circles around her eyes.

“There were clear signs of physical beatings on her face,” said Skylar Thompson,of Hrana. “It is clear that in addition to the psychological torture of being coerced into confessing, she has been physically beaten.”

Rashno remains in custody, Hrana said.

The confessions have provoked [outrage and alarm among](https://twitter.com/KhosroKalbasi/status/1552925167273349120) Iranians online. This week groups of women’s rights activists gathered in Tehran, [carrying placards](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202208165615) asking: “Where is Sepideh Rashno?”, and a video was released of Iranian women reciting a poem called The Confession.

Masih Alinejad, a journalist, activist and dissident, described the arrests as an [“act of terror”](https://twitter.com/AlinejadMasih/status/1553101808716988419). Alinejad spearheaded the [White Wednesday movement](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40218711), which began in 2014 and encouraged women to wear white and discard their headscarves. She was the target of a kidnap attempt in 2021 and last month a man with a rifle was arrested [outside her house](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/1/man-arrested-with-rifle-outside-home-of-us-iranian-journalist) in New York.

Prof Ali Ansari, a specialist in Middle Eastern politics at St Andrews University, said the tightening of hijab rules was part of a “systematic wider pattern of repression” within Iran that had worsened in the year since the election of Raisi in August 2021.

Raisi, who is more hardline than his predecessor Hassan Rouhani, took office at a time of [economic crisis](https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211105777644)after the reintroduction of sanctions by the US and a wave of protests against crippling inflation.

His first year in office has been marked by [“a programme of Islamisation from the ground up”](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85159), which has seen a resurgence of the guidance patrol, also known as the “morality police”, and a crackdown on any perceived western influence on Iranian society.

“State security has become pretty severe across the board,” Ansari told the Guardian. “The women’s movement is presented as a threat to national security, because it represents a breakdown in social norms and western influence penetrating society.”

Tara Sepehri Far of Human Rights Watch said forced confessions were intended to intimidate people and spread fear, but in the case of Rashno it was unlikely to be effective because, “she was visibly pale. She was visibly tired. There was no effort put into trying to portray that this was a voluntary narrative.”

She pointed to the introduction of [a population bill in November 2021](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/01/iran-repeal-crippling-new-anti-abortion-law-un-experts?LangID=E&NewsID=27817), which restricts access to abortion and contraception in an attempt to increase Iran’s falling birthrate, as part of political process aiming “to put women back in the house.”.

Thompson said that in the past year, “we’ve seen a surge in crackdowns against women like we have not seen for some time. It is something the international community needs to keep an eye on. These injustices are yet another consequence of the lack of accountability in Iran.”