

# Seeing Through the Thick Fog of the Islamophobia Assault on Hijab

Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria<sup>1</sup>

**T**he current Islamophobia assault on hijab in Iran should be understood as part of a hybrid warfare against the Islamic Republic. For more than 60 days, unsubstantiated news stories full of hypes, Orientalist tropes, and misinformation have flooded TV screens and social media platforms around the world. What is for the most part missed is the fact that we are witnessing old wine in new bottles. The old colonialist idea that Western culture is by essence superior to Eastern cultures is at the root of the current hijab conundrum. Thus, it could be said that we are witnessing the culmination of the western colonialist view of women, life and, freedom from several centuries of domination over the Islamic world. This view has several key propositions:

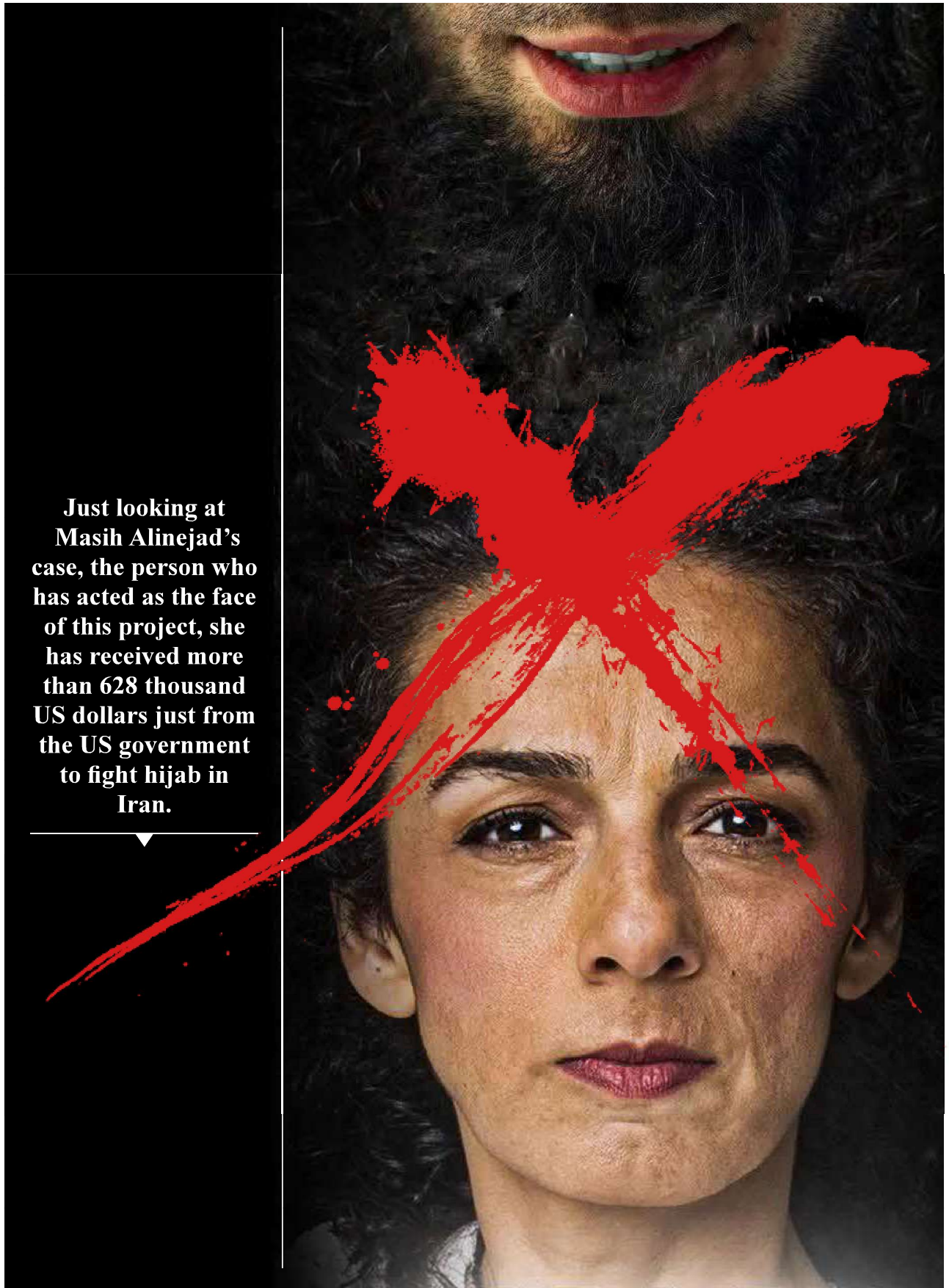
- 1** It is argued that the West is always at the forefront of development, and the East should follow the footsteps of the West to move from backwardness to civilization.
- 2** The women's liberation movement in the West has been accompanied by the increasing sexualization of women.
- 3** Therefore, women's freedom in the East must also function according to Western sexualized standards.

What remains unsaid in this line of argument is the fact that a century of the lived experience of women in the West is in front of us. Thus, problematizing the model that is presented to Iranian women as an alternative to their own

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1. P.h.D In North American Studies, Tehran University

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As colonialist powers attempted to expand their penetration and exploitation of Muslim lands, around the beginning of the 19th century, they found Islam to be the biggest obstacle to political-economic domination. Given the fact that, as mothers, women are agents of cultural transfer to the next generations, women became one of the main targets of cultural assault in all Islamic countries. Fighting hijab and the promotion of the western lifestyle became a trademark colonialist cultural policy in many Muslim countries including in Iran. In the quest for cultural dominance, colonialists used the grand narrative of freedom.

It is argued here that the Western media's coverage of what is happening in Iran is perhaps the biggest Islamophobia project in recent Muslim history with repercussions not only for Iranians but for all Muslim women around the world. One has to keep in mind that this has been a project in the making over the last decade. Just looking at Masih Alinejad's case, the person who has acted as the face of this project, she has received more than 628 thousand US dollars just from the US government to fight hijab in Iran<sup>1</sup>. About half of that money has been given to her during the Biden administration.

As was done at the beginning of the colonialist cultural penetration in Muslim lands, freedom is used as the macro-frame for explaining the situation. A duality is created here: the "free" West vs. the "unfree" Iran. And, what's more, it is "the White man's burden" to carry out the project of saving Muslim women from their religion and culture, as is evident in President Biden's vow to "free Iran" at an election campaign speech in early November, 2022.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, today we are at an advantage compared to people living during late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The results of the sexual revolution in the West are plain and evident for all to see. A question that should be addressed is as follows: "is it not fair to ask about the consequences of the Western model of women's liberation before adopting it, especially now that it has been the lived experience of women in the West for the past 100 years?"

1. <https://govtribe.com/vendors/masih-alinejad-7dek1>

See also <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/06/u-s-media-outlets-fail-to-disclose-u-s-government-ties-of-iranian-journalist-echoing-trump-talking-points/>

2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-vows-free-iran-west-coast-campaign-speech-2022-11-04/>





Experts believe in the emergence of rape culture in Western societies. The statistics of rape in the West and the collapse of the family system indicate this issue. In her book, *The Sexualization of Childhood*, Sharna Olfman, professor of psychology at Point Park University in Pennsylvania, USA, says:

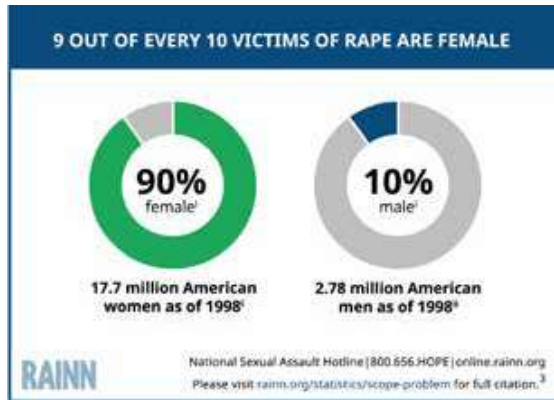
“To say we live in a rape culture means that we live in a culture in which rape is pervasive, prevalent and normalized through societal attitudes about gender, sex, and sexuality. ... For example, in the United States, researchers predict that one in four women will be raped by a man in her lifetime. Leaving statistics aside though, most women understand what it means to live in a rape culture because of their lived reality of doing so. ... One way of thinking about this is to realize regardless of how many women experience a rape or attempted rape within their lifetime, 100

percent of women experience the threat of rape within a rape culture. This means that all women’s lives are impacted.”<sup>3</sup>

“Sexual violence is a profound social and public health problem in the United States,” according to the US Department of Health’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report titled “Sexual Violence Surveillance.” While the available statistics clearly show the severity of the situation, many researchers and practitioners in the field believe that the available national statistics underestimate the number of victims of sexual violence. Below are some statistics in this regard. The numbers are taken from the “Rape, Sexual Abuse and Intimate Rape National Network (RAINN)” website. RAINN is the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States, which also cooperates with the US Department of Defense in this field.

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3. OLFMAN, S. (ED.). (2009). *THE SEXUALIZATION OF CHILDHOOD*. ABC-CLIO.



Every year, 80,600 American prisoners, 60,000 children, 433,648 people over the age of 12, and 18,900 people in the American military are victims of sexual assault. According to the statistics of the US Department of Justice, every 68 seconds, another American is sexually assaulted.<sup>4</sup>

Widespread sexual violence is found to hamper the American military's effectiveness. Reducing the problem is listed as one of the United States' 2022 National Security

strategies, where it is stated, "We will strengthen the effectiveness of the force by ... intensifying our suicide prevention efforts; eliminating the scourges of sexual assault, harassment, and other forms of violence, abuse, and discrimination..."<sup>5</sup> According to a 2022 report by the US Department of Defense, "Reports of sexual assault in the US military increased 13 percent in 2021... About 36,000 members of the military said in a confidential survey

that they had experienced unwanted sexual contact – "A significant increase from the roughly 20,000 who said so in a similar survey in 2018."

This problem is also seen among the American police. Rampant police rape and sexual harassment against women, especially black and colored women, in America is a problem matching in severity that of deadly police brutality. Guardian newspaper reported in this regard: "Between 2005 and 2015, there were 517 cases of forcible rape by police in the US, according to Philip Stinson, a Bowling Green state University criminal justice professor. An officer is accused of sexual misconduct, the second most common complaint against officers, at least once every five days in the US, according to one analysis."<sup>6</sup>

The situation in other western countries is also very serious in terms of sexual violence. Only a few examples suffice.

On November 30, 2021, The New York Times published a report titled "Like Fresh Meat: Detailing Rampant Sex Harassment in Australia's Parliament." The story opens as follows: "Men strutting down corridors looking women up and down. Women carrying fake binders to block unwanted advances. Forcible touches, kisses and comments

4. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2019 (2020). Note: RAINN applies a 5-year rolling average to adjust for changes in the year-to-year NCVS survey data.

5. National Security strategy. October 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-strategy-10.2022.pdf>

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/10/phoenix-police-officers-rape-sexual-assault>



about appearance. Fears of speaking out. A sweeping review of the workplace culture in Australia's Parliament paints a damning picture of widespread sexual harassment, with employees sharing harrowing stories of an alcohol-soaked atmosphere where powerful men blurred lines and crossed boundaries with impunity.<sup>7</sup> The situation of women looks grim in Britain as well. According to the report of UN Women UK, the United Nations monitoring body for gender equality in England, 97% of British women aged 18 to 24 have experienced sexual harassment. This figure for all English women, regardless of age, was 70%.<sup>8</sup>

The crisis of sexual violence in Western countries is rooted in the sexualization of women in such societies where women's worth is measured against their sexualized appearance. The issue is tackled in depth by the American Psychological Association report on the sexualization of girls in America.<sup>9</sup> Western culture is so obsessed with women's

appearance that it has become "beauty sick," to use the title of a book by Dr. Rene Engeln, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, USA. Psychological problems like body shame, depression, anorexia, anxiety, etc. have been found associated with the sexualization of women. More importantly, women's social agency is reduced in the process.

Interestingly that the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution is the only constitution in the world where the government is made responsible to tackle the problem of women's objectification.

With the colonialist-oriented propaganda campaign against hijab though there is no space left for such an assessment of the status of women in the western model of women's liberation. Such an assessment is, nonetheless, a necessity, and unless we take the time to see through the thick smoke of anti-Iran Islamophobic propaganda, all Muslims will suffer in the long run.

7. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/world/australia/parliament-harassment-report.html>

8. <https://www.unwomenuk.org/safe-spaces-now>

9. Zurbriggen, E. L., Collins, R. L., Lamb, S., Roberts, T. A., Tolman, D. L., & Ward, L. M. (2007). *APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>