



Social Desk

In Iran, women are not legally prohibited from riding motorcycles, and no law explicitly states they are not allowed to do so. However, based on a loophole in Article 20 of the "Traffic Violation Law," the responsibility for issuing motorcycle licenses falls under the purview of the Islamic Republic's law enforcement, which has consistently shied away from issuing licenses to women simply because the law mentions "men." This omission has led to a lack of clarity, leaving women in a gray area. The issue of female motorcyclists is not a new one; it has been a contentious topic for years, with ongoing debates about the legal, cultural, and societal implications. Nevertheless, policymakers have yet to take a stance on recognizing women's right to ride motorcycles. A sociologist believes that the reason for the inaction is that policymakers in Iran are hesitant to rock the boat and make any changes to the existing laws regarding women. Although there is no law that explicitly prohibits women from riding motorcycles, the lack of clear legislation has resulted in financial and safety risks for women. They are unable to access standardized training, and if they do own a motorcycle, they are not entitled to third-party insurance. This legal vacuum has serious consequences. Despite these challenges, women have found ways to circumvent the system, just as they have with other restrictions. For instance, some have dressed in men's clothing to gain entry to sports stadiums or have pushed the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in terms of hijab. It appears that the number of female motorcyclists in large cities has increased over time. Interviews with several female motorcyclists reveal that they have received more positive feedback in recent years, although they still face some sexist harassment. For instance, Bahar from Isfahan has been riding a motorcycle for almost two years now. She had dreamed of doing so for about eight years, but her family had been opposed to it after she was once arrested for riding a bicycle. However, after the protests of 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini, she made up her

mind to take the plunge. "I decided to give motorcycling a try, but I made sure to wear a hijab, as I believe I'm helping to raise awareness about women riding motorcycles, and I don't want to give anyone an excuse to criticize me," says Bahar. At first, people were shocked to see her on a motorcycle, and some men would even shout "Astaghfirullah!" (a phrase used to express shock or disgust) as she rode by. Some men would also make sexist comments, such as "Why don't you go sit behind a washing machine or stove?" On several occasions, men would even try to intimidate her by swerving their cars in front of her motorcycle, trying to throw her off balance. "However, there were also supportive men. Once a man pulled up next to me and offered words of encouragement. One time, a man even helped me when I was struggling to get my motorcycle onto the center stand, and on rainy days, men would often warn me to be more careful. Women also showed their support, cheering me on and telling me to keep riding." Although Bahar has always passed by the police with fear and anxiety, she has never been flagged down over the past two years. Despite her positive experiences, Bahar still cannot shake off the feeling of unease and has a key unanswered question. "I still don't understand why we were denied the right to ride motorcycles – a simple desire – for so long. While no law prohibits women from riding as passengers, why can't they be riders? I still don't have an answer to that question." Raha is another woman who is passionate about motorcycling and often rides her motorbike in Tehran. "I've never had a bad experience, but people are often surprised to see me on a motorcycle. They'll stare, cheer me on, or give me a thumbs-up. Even a police officer once gave me a nod of approval. Drivers are usually considerate and give me space on the road. A few days ago, a bus driver even warned me about a police checkpoint ahead, and I managed to avoid it by hid-

Female motorcyclists experience

From catcalls to evading police

In Iran, a growing number of women are hitting the road on motorcycles, despite a loophole in the traffic law that has effectively barred them from obtaining licenses. Undeterred by the obstacles, women are finding creative ways to ride motorbikes, with some receiving encouraging responses from the community. Now female bikers are calling on policymakers to recognize their right to ride.



ing behind the bus. I have never been stopped by the police because I am watchful and keep running away from cops. However, I'm always on edge, worried about getting caught by the traffic police. Unfortunately, I'm more concerned about getting stopped than about controlling my motorcycle or worrying about thieves and muggers and road hazards. If I get into an accident, I'll be at fault because I don't have a license. With the current economic situation, many people can't afford cars, and motorcycles are a convenient alternative for short distances." Sousan is another woman who occasionally rides her brother's motorcycle, but she has not bought one herself because she cannot get a license. She has even consulted with a lawyer about the possibility of getting a license, but it seems unlikely. "I know that if I buy a motorcycle, I'll want to use it all the time, so I've decided to use my brother's bike for now. In general, I've received positive feedback from people, who often say 'good for you!' when they see me riding. However, some men still make sexist comments, saying things like 'why don't you go sit behind a washing machine?' I've tried to get used to these negative reactions, but they still hurt."

Lack of courage to make changes

To delve deeper into this issue, we spoke with a sociologist to shed light on why Iran's laws regarding women's motorcycling, like many other areas, are lagging behind the rest of society. "Ms. Nafiseh Azad" pointed out that while women's presence in public spaces is relatively new, it is still met with significant restrictions. "Society still views certain places, times, and modes of transportation as off-limits to women," she explained. "This may seem irrational at first, but in reality, it's part of a broader trend where women are establishing their presence in public spaces. Women are no longer confined to their homes or neighborhoods; they're now navigating entire cities and making their presence felt."

Ms. Azad also is of the opinion

that Tehran's poor traffic management and inefficient public transportation systems make it a city that's difficult to navigate without a car. However, women face two major hurdles: First, owning a car is less common among women due to the higher cost, and second, women's use of the city is more diverse and complex than men's due to their multiple responsibilities, including shopping, childcare, and maintaining family relationships. As a result, women tend to travel more frequently over medium distances.

Furthermore, Ms. Azad argued that the city's infrastructure encourages people to use motorcycles, and many men who own cars prefer to use motorcycles to avoid traffic, traffic restrictions, and red lights. Consequently, women's decision to use motorcycles is, to a large extent, a product of the city's circumstances. When objective conditions necessitate it, societal changes occur. Not all women who ride motorcycles are consciously fighting for a cause, although they are, in effect, doing so. Rather, the practical demands of their daily lives have driven them to take to the roads.

Ms. Azad continued, it appears that policymakers are hesitant to make any changes to laws related to women, seemingly paralyzed by fear and anxiety. These issues aren't fundamental problems that contradict higher laws. Of course, there has always been resistance to women's mobility in all societies, such as the opposition to women's cycling in the West in the past. However, this type of resistance to recognizing women's rights reveals that policymakers lack the courage to make changes. The restriction on women's motorcycling is absurd, given that women can obtain a Class-A driver's license or ride as passengers on motorcycles, but not drive themselves. Policymakers could simply let this issue slide, resist it, or issue a statement, and society would move on. Alternatively, they could easily make it legal, provide women with licenses and training, and require them to wear helmets, but it seems that Iranian policymakers have chosen the first approach.

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