

# Call for urgent action: physical and mental health needs of children participating in the nationwide protests in Iran 2022

October 2022

Iran has been the scene of uprisings against its government for many weeks now, which the Iranian government has sought to suppress with great force. Iranian teenagers are key victims in this process. To safeguard their physical and mental well-being as much as possible, it is imperative that international organizations start to offer support to these youngsters. This policy brief offers further details on the why and how. Child protestors



*Teenage protestors are experiencing a huge backlash from Iranian authorities and are in need of international support.*

## Child protestors

As has been well covered by international media, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been rocked by nationwide protests for weeks now, taking place in over 80 cities across Iran. In these protests, women and young people are at the forefront. The latter group does not just include students, but also children, mostly teenagers.

School pupils play an active role in the street protests, sometimes also instigating these themselves. Schools have also been turned into centers of resistance. In various schools across the country, particularly girl schools, school pupils protested against the (policies of) the Iranian regime, for instance by removing head coverings, jointly singing protest songs or by tearing down and burning pictures of both the founder and the present leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and by organizing or joining protest marches from school to home.

## Personal costs

This involvement has come at a heavy price. The Iranian regime has clamped down on the protestors, including on minors. The BBC [announced](#) on 26 October that “at least 28 children have been killed by Iranian police or security forces”. According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child “[hundreds more have been injured, detained and tortured](#)”.

Detained children may also face sexual and psychological abuse and be pressured into making false statements as to how they were treated during their imprisonment or into revealing the names or hide-outs of fellow protestors. Rather than releasing arrested children as soon as possible, the [Ministry of Education](#) announced some may be sent to mental institutions and juvenile detention centers.



*During protests in Tehran, the 16-years old Nika Shakarami disappeared (left picture). Ten days later, her family was informed of her death. 16-year-old Zakaria Khial (right picture) was killed during a street protest in Piranshahr, West Azerbaijan province, after security forces fired at him at point-blank range.*

The plight of detained teenagers is exacerbated by the following factors:

- There is often a lack of awareness among teenagers and their parents on their personal and legal rights after mass arrests
- Parents, teachers, and society may not recognise the hardship of detained children following their release, including the occurrence of mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress syndrome

### **Extra vulnerable**

Even if their participation in the protests does not lead to their arrest, teenage protestors face several other pressures because of the unique context in which they operate:

- They are in the difficult years of adolescence with all the physical, mental, and psychological changes that accompany puberty
- They are not familiar with the concept of social movements and nonviolent struggles
- Being young and relatively inexperienced, they are at increased risk of being used by radical, non-democratic opposition forces. Likewise, government secret agents may deliberately put them forward in high-risk conflict situations.
- They are at risk of expulsion from school following protest activities inside and around of schools. Also, school principals and vice-principals are often recruited or pressured by security forces to disclose the identity of protesting children, thereby putting them at risk of being arrested. School has ceased to be a safe space
- There may be increased tensions at home because of parental concern for their children's' involvement in the protests
- They may have to mourn the loss of peers or other loved ones for the first time in their lives, while also having to get used to the increased volatility of daily life
- Participation in protest movements comes at high personal costs. Young activists may not recognize the importance of self-care and personal wellbeing

# Key actors influencing the wellbeing of children protestors

## Parents

Some parents support their children joining the protests, while others disagree and come into conflict with their children. When participating in protests, their children might be exposed to violent scenes or be physically assaulted themselves by police or the security forces.

## Teachers and educational staff

In the educational system there is little room for attention to civic activism and democracy. However, teachers and schools could pay attention to these important topics with reference to the current protest movements.

Teachers play an important role in identifying problems with children as well as providing advice and counseling when children experience mental health issues after protesting or being arrested.

## Police and security forces

Security forces and police have not just been cracking down on childrens' protests across the country. They have also actively recruited (often poor) children to act as riot police, through the so-called Basij children unit. International organizations should stress more on childrens' rights in protests and pressure Iranian security forces to follow international standards.

## Physicians and nurses

Children who are beaten during protests or after being arrested are brought to physicians. Besides focusing on the physical trauma, medical staff should also pay attention to potential mental implications, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Altogether, Iranian teenagers who participate in the protests in one way or another are in urgent need of support. **International organizations can support them by funding or creating the following types of support:**

- Online counseling services: the creation of a free and safe online platform to offer physical and mental health counseling to children and their parents. Such a platform should provide access to physicians (in case emergency medical services are needed due to physical violence), psychiatrists, and mental health counselors.
- Hotline: dedicated phone advice line or online advice platform to offer legal advice to arrested children, their parents and (concerned) teachers.
- Know your rights kits: educational kits on the legal rights of children who are arrested are required to inform children, parents, and teachers. These kits could include video clips, infographics, podcasts, and various other multi-media products.
- Talk to Me campaign: a campaign on the importance of sharing personal experiences with the proposed name of "Talk to Me" is instrumental to create social awareness and document personal narratives. This campaign can be developed on Twitter and TikTok, the social media platforms most popular among youngsters. Children should be encouraged to talk to their parents, family members and other trusted individuals about their experiences during protests and detention.
- Civic activism training: Civic activism is not a part of the school curriculum. As a result, most children don't know how to participate in a civic movement. They are not familiar with tactics on mobilization and protesting, which may result in them undertaking dangerous acts which puts themselves and their movement in danger. Moreover, young activists may, as mentioned earlier, not yet be familiar with the importance of self-care and personal well-being, which increases the risk that their participation in protest movements comes at high personal costs. Training through podcasts, video clips, and other multi-media products is essential for a sustainable protest movement that is healthy and effective. These training materials should target both youngsters and their parents and teachers, in order for the latter group to get more acquainted with the needs of teenage protestors
- Mental health training: parents and teachers, as well as nurses and physicians should be educated on the mental health issues that children who participate in protests, and children which are arrested and detained, could encounter and how to approach these. These experiences can represent a severe mental burden for children, making the availability of (adequate) support essential.

## About us

Volunteer Activists (VA) is a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands. From 2001 to 2007, VA operated inside Iran as the largest capacity building organization in the country. From 2012, the VA team continued its activism from Amsterdam following security threats. Assisting Iranian CSOs through research-informed capacity building is one of the primary activities of VA. Other specialisations include: facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, advocacy and expansion of democracy and human rights and peace building - both within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.



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