

From
marginalization
to
equality?

**Report on the state of
disability rights in Iran**

 **VolunteerActivists**

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Executive Summary

This document reflects the efforts of Volunteer Activists (VA) to conduct a thorough examination of disability rights issues and related protests in Iran, focusing on the period from 2020 to 2024. Through this initiative, VA seeks to offer the global community valuable insights into the pressing challenges and protests surrounding disability rights in Iran. Recognizing the voices of disabled individuals on an international platform is essential for advancing the disability rights movement in the country. Furthermore, understanding the needs of disabled individuals and the organizations advocating for their rights allows international donors to tailor their programs and initiatives, thereby improving their effectiveness. With its established connections within Iran, VA is well-positioned to provide this critical information.

The complex landscape of disability rights in Iran, marked by its diversity, required extensive and careful research to accurately map the current situation regarding these issues and struggles. Our assessment drew from various sources, including firsthand personal stories shared by disabled individuals through social media and activist platforms. Secondary data sources comprised verified media reports, published studies, and social media analysis.

From this research, several key observations regarding disability rights and protests in Iran in the 2020s have emerged:

- Unlike other types of protests, disability rights demonstrations continued after the violent crackdown of the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement.
- The number of disability protests continues to rise.
- A significant driver of these protests appears to be the rampant inflation in the Iranian economy, which has not been matched by corresponding increases—or even payouts—in support services and benefits for disabled individuals. Growing awareness that disabled people have the same rights as other citizens is another contributing factor.

Additional insights from this report are summarized in Table 1.

Disabled individuals constitute a large minority in Iran, with government statistics indicating a disability prevalence rate of 115 per 1,000 people.
By 2020, extensive lawmaking protecting the rights of Iranians with disabilities was in place. New laws were also adopted that indirectly allow for better protection of vulnerable disabled individuals, including children.
The government's lack of implementation of its own laws on disability rights has become a contentious issue. Additionally, the language used in some laws is at times discriminatory.
Disability activists have been making connections with other vulnerable groups, and intersectional efforts are sometimes emerging.
Thousands of disabled children in Iran do not attend school or are placed in specialized schools when they could attend regular ones, hampering their chances of becoming economically independent as adults.
Social media have increasingly become an area for disabled Iranians to present themselves and their struggles, thereby diminishing shame and increasing awareness
Due to a lack of adaptations in public infrastructure and insufficient aid at home, many disabled Iranians experience social isolation.
The lack of government support often leaves family members of disabled individuals overstretched.
There have been various instances of (deadly) abuse in government homes for disabled people, and disabled Iranians sometimes also face verbal or physical abuse from family members.
Due to their often difficult life circumstances, many disabled Iranians experience trauma and psychological stress. However, specialized help is rarely available or is only accessible to the wealthy.
Disabled Iranians often live well below the poverty line.
By enhancing their organizational efforts and diversifying approaches, Iranian disability rights activists can work towards achieving greater successes. The international community can support these initiatives by strengthening connections between foreign and Iranian disability rights organizations and by placing a greater emphasis on socio-economic rights in Iran.

Table 1: Takeaways from the research



1. Introduction

On March 23, 2017, the atmosphere surrounding disability rights in Iran seemed filled with promise and optimism. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities had just concluded its review of Iran's initial report on implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This moment underscored the country's stated commitment to enhancing the lives of individuals with disabilities. Leading the Iranian delegation was Ambassador Mohsen Naziri Asl, accompanied by Ms. Zahra Nemati, a celebrated Paralympic gold medalist from the Rio 2016 and London 2012 Games. Her presence symbolized progress and recognition for persons with disabilities in Iran, presenting a hopeful narrative of inclusion.

During the presentation, the Iranian representative emphasized that, under Islamic laws and Sharia principles, individuals with disabilities are to be treated with dignity and respect. He outlined the measures Iran had taken to improve accessibility, provide reasonable accommodations, and expand support for persons with disabilities. These efforts included the country's accession to the Convention and the passage of the comprehensive Law for Persons with Disabilities in 2004 – a legislative milestone aimed at safeguarding the rights of Iranians with a disability. The government expressed determination to implement the Convention effectively, signaling what appeared to be a significant turning point in the nation's disability rights landscape.

Yet, despite these declarations and legal frameworks, the lived reality for persons with disabilities in Iran remains starkly different. This disparity was vividly illustrated during the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests, where Iranians with disabilities courageously highlighted the barriers they face daily. For them, attending such gatherings was an act of resilience, fraught with logistical challenges and personal risks, particularly given the threat of intervention by police or security forces. These struggles underscore the deep sense of urgency and frustration within the disability community in Iran.

In a society already burdened with widespread economic and social hardships, individuals with disabilities face even greater challenges. Despite international commitments and domestic legislation, many Iranians with disabilities receive little to no support, while available benefits often fall woefully short of their needs. Barriers to education persist, with schools frequently lacking wheelchair accessibility, while public spaces remain largely inaccessible—only a few shopping malls and metro stations, primarily in Tehran, provide even minimal accommodations.

As a result, many individuals with disabilities find themselves marginalized, heavily reliant on aging family members for care and support, which can lead to increased social isolation over time. Compounding these issues is the persistent stigma surrounding disability, often manifesting in discriminatory practices within public services and governmental institutions. Alarming, no significant government campaigns exist to tackle these biases or promote greater awareness and inclusion.

Despite these challenges, a shift is underway. Driven by necessity, frustration, and a changing social climate, Iranians with disabilities are becoming more vocal, advocating for their rights and demanding better conditions.

This report provides an in-depth exploration of the state of disability rights in Iran, with a particular focus on developments between 2020-2024. To that end it has three objectives:

- Identify challenges for Iranians with disabilities and subsequent disability rights protests in the period under study
- Analyze government policies that affect disability issues and rights
- Propose ways forward to promote a better safeguarding for disability rights in Iran



Methodology

The data presented in this report is derived from three primary sources. First and foremost, we gathered insights from our contacts with Iranian activists, who provided valuable perspectives on the situation. Additionally, we analyzed verified reports from Iranian newspapers and conducted social media monitoring. Following this initial research, we conducted a targeted search for English sources, such as newspapers and policy reports, which were incorporated into the report wherever possible to enhance accessibility and facilitate verification or further reading.

Collecting information in authoritarian regimes poses inherent challenges due to the risk of reprisals for speaking out. As a result, the issues related to disability in Iran are likely more extensive than what is detailed in this report.

The report begins by examining the key challenges faced by citizens with disabilities in Iran, followed by an analysis of their potential role in recent protests. The third chapter offers an overview of the government stance towards both disability rights and disability rights protests. Finally, the report concludes with an analysis of potential paths forward and discusses how the international community can assist Iranian disability activists in their pursuit of a better future.



2. Barriers to Equality



Iranians with a disability face numerous challenges that vary based on personal circumstances. This chapter will highlight some of the key challenges that are often emphasized by individuals with disabilities that speak up, including activists.

Disability Rates in Iran

The Rehabilitation Office of Iran's State Welfare Organization reported a disability prevalence rate of 115 per 1,000 individuals in the population, which translates to approximately 11.5% of Iran's 85 million residents, based on data published in 2024, based on information gathered between 2019 and 2023. However, the epidemiological study did not assess the prevalence of chronic mental illnesses; instead, it relied solely on responses from family members, as well as certifications and prescriptions from the treating physicians of the patients. Furthermore, the exact number of disabled individuals in Iran remains a topic of debate, as some experts argue that government estimates significantly underestimate the actual figures. 11.5% of the 85 million population (approximately 9.775 million individuals) are reported to have disabilities ranging from mild to severe, according to data published in 2024. In contrast, the general census of 2011-2012 reported only 1.3% (975,000 individuals out of a population of 75 million). As of 2023, however, the Behzisti database lists only 1.6 million individuals with disabilities, significantly underrepresenting the actual figures, with most of the registered cases being severe.

Limited Mobility

For Iranians with a disability, navigating public spaces can be an incredibly challenging experience. Many encounter significant barriers, including inadequate infrastructure and poorly designed public areas. Sidewalks are often uneven or obstructed, making it difficult for individuals with mobility impairments to move safely. Public transportation frequently lacks the necessary accommodations, leaving many unable to travel independently.

Altogether this creates an environment where many Iranians with a disability feel isolated and discouraged from engaging in public life since the simple act of going out can be a daunting or even dangerous activity.

Inadequate Homes and Home Assistance

The challenges of mobility for individuals with a disability are further compounded by a lack of suitable housing and home assistance. Articles 17, 18, and 19 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2018) address the right to housing for citizens with a disability, including provisions for loans to purchase and make homes accessible. However, in the six years since the law was enacted, only 4% of Iran's disabled population—according to official statistics, which are widely believed to underreport the actual number of disabled individuals—has benefited from housing services.

Meanwhile, any disabled individuals require assistance just to leave their homes or even get out of bed. State-provided support, such as nursing care, is virtually nonexistent, placing the burden of care on family members. While this may seem supportive, it can lead to resentment and may not be sustainable in the long run. Relatively affluent families who can afford to hire nurses often find the quality of care lacking; there are numerous complaints about the skills and lack of supervision of caregivers.

Iranian-Specific Causes of Disability

The causes of disability in Iran often mirror those found in other countries, including factors such as an aging population and hereditary diseases. However, there are certain causes that are more pronounced or unique to Iran. One significant issue is the country's high incidence of car accidents. Additionally, the Iran-Iraq War has contributed to a notable number of disabled veterans, and the presence of unexploded land mines from that conflict continues to pose risks, particularly to children.

Furthermore, [UNICEF has reported](#) that [some regions](#) in Iran experience relatively high rates of consanguineous marriages, which can increase the likelihood of genetic disorders in offspring. Lastly, incidents of police violence have also been identified as a contributing factor to disability. For example, the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley documented that approximately 120 individuals in Iran suffered partial or complete loss of sight due to the use of shotguns, paintball guns, and tear gas canisters by security forces during women's rights protests in late 2022.

Educational Barriers

Under the UN Convention ratified by Iran in 2018, children with disabilities are entitled to inclusive education, allowing them to learn alongside their peers in mainstream schools. However, many disabled children in Iran face significant obstacles, with government statistics from the 2018-2019 school year showing that out of 1.5 million school-age children with disabilities, only 150,000 were enrolled, and more than half were placed in segregated "special" schools.

This issue is largely driven by early medical assessments based on IQ tests, which determine whether children are deemed "educable." Those who score low are often assigned to segregated schools, while the lowest scorers may be denied education altogether. [Unlike neighboring Turkey](#), there are no regular reassessments to evaluate students' educational needs.

Even when eligible for mainstream education, disabled pupils encounter challenges such as inaccessible buildings and a lack of support. Societal stigma can also lead to refusals of enrollment. Consequently, many children with disabilities do not complete their education, and those in specialized schools often receive inadequate support, resulting in lower qualifications.

Disabled adults also face challenges in pursuing higher education – even when they qualify – despite many institutions offering free tuition. Numerous universities, especially those outside the capital, remain inaccessible to wheelchair users and lack adequate accommodations for blind or deaf students.

Stigma & Discrimination

Prejudices against disabled people are widespread, often exacerbated by their limited visibility in daily life due to the challenges they face. The absence of governmental or regional campaigns to raise awareness further perpetuates misunderstanding. While some religious beliefs promote support for disabled individuals, conservative interpretations can lead to the view that disability is a divine punishment for past misdeeds. In some cases, families may choose to hide disabled members from public view.

Poverty

Finding employment is difficult for disabled Iranians. Even when having relevant education and qualifications, many struggle to secure jobs due to societal biases and logistical barriers. As a result, an estimated 60 percent of disabled Iranians are unemployed, making them at least five times more likely to be without work compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Discriminatory Job Ads

The widespread discrimination against disabled individuals in Iran, including within governmental institutions, is often reflected in job advertisements. For example, a 2019 job posting by the Iranian state broadcaster, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), listed “lack of physical disability” as a key requirement. Source: [Iran Human Rights](#)

Obtaining state support is challenging. When assistance is provided, it is often insufficient for a decent quality of life. The law states that the allowance for individuals with severe disabilities should match the minimum wage of 7,160,000 tomans, but in practice, it averages around 700,000 tomans (approximately €8.60 or \$9). In April 2024, the government announced a 30% increase in monthly stipends, raising the allowance to only 1 million tomans (about \$15 USD), which remains below the minimum wage in 2024 (set at 7 million tomans per month) and national poverty line. Many report that their stipends barely cover basic necessities like food and medicine, and essential items such as assistive devices are unaffordable. Consequently, many disabled Iranians rely on their family for support, which is increasingly difficult to maintain for many families due to Iran's economic crisis and corresponding rampant price inflation.

Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare is essential for individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, individuals with physical disabilities often face barriers when trying to access hospitals and medical clinics, as many facilities lack essential features like ramps and elevators. Those who are blind or have low vision may avoid visiting healthcare providers alone due to the inaccessibility of buildings and inadequate assistance from staff. Similarly, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals report [that the absence of sign language interpreters](#) prevents them from utilizing healthcare services independently.

Additionally, medical equipment often fails to meet the needs of disabled patients. For example, access to mammogram machines is limited, with only one or two options available in Tehran, both of which have long waiting lists for women in need of these services. Services for individuals with mental disabilities are also scarce and frequently lack the necessary expertise.

The high cost of healthcare further complicates access for disabled individuals, especially given their low or nonexistent income. This is particularly true for services beyond basic physiotherapy or first-line therapies. Access to rehabilitation equipment, such as wheelchairs, prosthetics, and hearing aids, [is limited due to high costs and insufficient domestic production](#).

Many families cannot afford these essential devices, leaving individuals unable to fully participate in daily activities. The lack of such equipment not only hampers mobility and communication but also contributes to social isolation.

Moreover, medical professionals sometimes administer treatments to individuals with disabilities without obtaining informed consent or providing comprehensive information about available options. For instance, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is often performed unnecessarily and without proper consent on individuals with psychosocial disabilities or mental health conditions, even when it may not be beneficial.

Another significant issue is the lack of access to essential medications (see Textbox below).

Examples of Urgent Medication Needs

10-1-2 Medication for Spinal Muscular Atrophy Patients

Individuals with disabilities, such as those with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), face life-threatening shortages of necessary drugs. The unavailability of treatments like Spinraza has led some families to seek medical asylum in Europe to access life-saving medications.

10-1-3 Medication for Thalassemia Patients:

Since 2018, over 1,100 thalassemia patients have died due to lack of access to necessary drugs. In 2023 alone, approximately 280 patients succumbed to complications from the disease, a stark increase from the pre-2018 average of fewer than 30 annual deaths.

10-1-4 Medication for Epidermolysis Bullosa Patients:

Children with EB, known as “butterfly children,” suffer from painful skin conditions. The withdrawal of specialized wound dressings by a Swedish company, due to sanctions, has led to increased suffering and fatalities among these children.

10-1-5 Medication for Hemophilia Patients:

Around 40,000 individuals with hemophilia have faced shortages of blood-clotting medications, resulting in the suspension of necessary surgeries and increased mortality.

Abuse

Numerous documented instances of abuse have occurred in state homes for disabled children and adults. One tragic [recent example](#) is the death of a 38-year-old man with intellectual disabilities who was assaulted and beaten by staff members at a disability center in Hamadan Province, overseen by the Hamadan Welfare Organization.

Rehabilitation and care facilities are known for systemic failures in oversight and accountability. Abuse in these institutions can take various forms, including physical punishment, verbal harassment, and neglect of basic needs like hygiene and nutrition.

Compounding these issues is the hiring of unqualified staff in many care centers, which significantly increases the risk of mistreatment. The lack of trained personnel leads to inadequate care and support for residents, further exacerbating their challenges.

Overcrowding is another prevalent issue, with many facilities housing more residents than their intended capacity allows. This results in cramped living conditions that compromise the well-being of individuals with disabilities.

Poor sanitation is also a serious concern, as reports and images reveal unsanitary environments where inadequate hygiene practices contribute to health risks among residents. The lack of basic necessities, including medical supplies and appropriate bedding, underscores the systemic issues in resource allocation for disability care.

Together, these factors create an environment where individuals with disabilities are vulnerable to abuse and neglect, highlighting the urgent need for reform and improved oversight in these institutions.

Incidents of Violence in Care Institutions

9-3-1 Narges Charity Institute – Shiraz:

In April 2024, the Narges Charity Institute in Shiraz faced allegations of child abuse. Reports indicated that children under the institute's care were subjected to severe mistreatment, including physical abuse and neglect. The State Welfare Organization intervened, leading to the dismissal of the institute's director and initiating legal proceedings against those responsible.

The director of the **Narges Charity Institute** in Shiraz was dismissed following reports of abuse and mistreatment of children under the institute's care. This incident has raised concerns about the oversight and regulation of organizations responsible for supporting vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities.

The State Welfare Organization of Shiraz ordered the closure of the institute, although a 20-day period was provided for appeals against the decision. This action followed years of allegations and reports of severe mistreatment of children with disabilities at the facility.

9-3-2 Ehsan Rehabilitation Center - Ahvaz

In May 2024, reports emerged of mistreatment in facilities such as the **Ehsan Ahvaz Rehabilitation Center for the Mentally Disabled**, where residents suffered from neglect and abuse. These cases highlighted systemic issues within this care institution, including inadequate oversight and training.

9-3-3 Blue Lotuses Center - Bushehr

In August 2023, the "Blue Lotuses Center" in Bushehr, a facility for individuals with disabilities, came under scrutiny following reports of abuse. Investigations revealed that a staff member was dismissed not for the abuse but for a separate violation, raising concerns about accountability and oversight in care institutions. The head of the parliamentary social commission acknowledged viewing the abuse footage three months prior, yet no immediate action was taken, highlighting systemic neglect.

9-3-4 Nikan Center - Mashhad

In September 2023, a distressing video emerged showing sexual abuse and physical violence against residents of the **Nikan Residential Center for Intellectually Disabled Boys** in Mashhad. The footage depicted staff members engaging in abusive acts, including sexual assault and physical punishment, against the residents. Following public outrage, the **State Welfare Organization** announced the arrest of the perpetrators and initiated an investigation. However, details about the progress and outcomes of the investigation remain scarce, raising concerns about transparency and accountability.

9-3-5 Fatemeh Zahra Rehabilitation and Care Center - Jahrom

In July 2023, the **Fatemeh Zahra Rehabilitation and Care Center** in Jahrom, Iran, became the center of a disturbing controversy following reports of abuse and violence against its residents. This incident sheds light on systemic failures in the management and oversight of care facilities for individuals with disabilities in the country.

Residents, primarily individuals with intellectual disabilities, were reportedly subjected to:

- **Burning with a Lighter:** A cruel and deliberate act of physical violence, causing both physical and emotional trauma.
- **Slapping and Beating:** Instances of physical punishment used as a form of discipline or control.
- **Verbal Abuse:** Reports indicate frequent verbal harassment that further marginalized and dehumanized the victims.

The brother of the center's director was employed as a **sports instructor** but lacked formal qualifications for working with individuals with disabilities. He was directly implicated in the abuse. Staff at the center reported being coerced into silence and expressed fear of retaliation from the management.

Even within their own family homes, individuals with disabilities may not be safe from verbal or physical abuse. Stigmatization within families can lead to isolation and emotional harm, as disabled individuals are often viewed as burdens rather than valued members of the household. For example, they may hear comments like, "[All you do is eat. You are useless.](#)" or experience other forms of diminishment. Women with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to domestic violence. Additionally, many disabled individuals face neglect within their families, often stemming from poverty, social isolation, or a lack of awareness about disability rights.

The absence of robust state intervention, such as support from home caregivers, exacerbates this situation, allowing issues to go unnoticed while also increasing the likelihood that family members become chronically overstretched. This challenge extends beyond physical disabilities; family members caring for individuals with mental health challenges face similar struggles. A tragic incident in Iran, where a mother killed her severely autistic son, was widely viewed as a desperate act resulting from caregiver burnout.

Trauma and stress

Due to their often challenging life circumstances – ranging from economic stress to social isolation – many individuals with disabilities experience psychological trauma or suffer from depression. Unfortunately, adequate professional help is not always accessible, especially for poorer Iranians.

Conclusion

In summary, disabled individuals in Iran face numerous barriers that impede their full participation in society. These challenges include inadequate access to healthcare, limited educational opportunities, and insufficient government support. The lack of government involvement has widened the gap between poor and wealthy Iranians, leaving those with fewer resources particularly vulnerable. Additionally, societal stigma and a lack of awareness further exacerbate their difficulties.



3. Disability Rights Protests

In recent years, the global perspective on disability has shifted significantly. Once viewed as «charity cases,» individuals with disabilities are increasingly recognized as deserving of rights and equal treatment. In Iran, a similar transformation has taken place within the disabled community, marked by a notable rise in disability rights protests from 2020 to 2024. While the quest for equal rights is the foundation of these protests, protests were at times also influenced by major societal developments in Iran, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the «Women, Life, Freedom» movement.

To provide insight into these protests and their evolution, the following sections will unfold chronologically, examining each year in detail.

2020: COVID-19 protests

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced for many Iranians with disabilities new hurdles. This stimulated individual activism, for instance centred around demands for improved healthcare access for people with disabilities, who are often particularly vulnerable to corona. Social media often played an important role in amplifying their messages. One such an activist was Samaneh Shabani (see text box below), who ended up not just making national headlines, but international ones as well.

Disability During COVID-19

Samaneh Shabani, a blind individual, became a prominent disability activist during the COVID-19 pandemic, garnering significant attention from both local and foreign media. The sudden quiet of deserted city streets disrupted her primary sensory connections—hearing and touch—making navigation increasingly difficult. The absence of familiar sounds that guided her movements led to disorientation, while her reliance on tactile feedback heightened her risk of infection as touching surfaces became a concern. This combination of factors not only complicated safe navigation but also increased anxiety during an already challenging time. In addition to highlighting barriers faced by blind individuals, Shabani raised awareness of obstacles affecting all disabled people, as well as domestic violence against disabled women..

The pandemic indeed intensified the daily struggles of individuals with various disabilities. Issues such as the lack of wheelchair ramps in buildings and limited access to public transportation became more pronounced. Furthermore, the shortage of sign language interpreters in healthcare facilities and public services heightened, as well as a critical lack of home caregivers for those with mobility challenges.

Source: [UN](#)

2021: COVID-19 & Doplurei's protest journey

Protests about the government's inaction regarding COVID-19 and Iranians with disabilities sparked once again demonstrations. For instance, in late October, a group of blind individuals [organized a protest](#) outside the State Welfare Organization in Isfahan to express their frustration over the government's indifference to their needs.

A remarkable individual effort was Kamran Doplurei's 115 km journey from Marivan to Sanandaj in a wheelchair, aimed at raising awareness of the challenges faced by disabled Iranians. Doplurei went viral on social media and was interviewed by multiple media outlets, successfully highlighting the plight of many disabled individuals due to a lack of government attention.

Kamran Doplurei

Kamran Doplurei's is a wheelchair-bound Iranian from Kurdistan province. After losing both legs to gunfire from Iranian border guards, Doplurei faced the harsh realities of life for disabled individuals in Iran, compounded by a lack of government support. Throughout his journey, he expressed his shock to media outlets and on social media at being unable to afford a wheelchair or prosthetic legs due to the inadequacy of his government stipend, until a student charity intervened. Doplurei became a prominent advocate for a rights-based approach to disability rights. In an interview with Iran Wire, he stated, "No one chooses to be disabled," adding, "We face not only physical pain but also anxiety over meeting our basic needs, especially with soaring inflation. Although the law provides for various rights and services, in practice, less than five percent of these commitments are fulfilled." Although Doplurei initially intended to conclude his journey in Tehran in front of Parliament, warnings from supporters and fellow disabled Iranians led him to end his trip on September 15.



2022: Uprising, medicine access and equal minimum income

The emergence of the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement following Mahsa Amini’s death in police custody also stimulated disability rights protests. Disabled individuals joined demonstrations in key cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad, shedding light on their own struggles within the broader fight for justice and equality. Many participants used wheelchairs or mobility aids, carrying signs that read, “Equality includes us too” and “Our silence does not mean we are invisible.” Their participation in the protests was often met with solidarity. For instance, during the uprising feminist (academic) activists raised issues surrounding bodily autonomy and the economy of care. As part of this discourse, they criticized the ableist paradigm regarding human bodies, with particular attention to the experiences and realities of disabled bodies.

In September, individuals with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) and their families protested outside the Ministry of Health in Tehran due to the lack of essential medications, particularly Eteplirsen, which helps slow the disease’s progression.

Meanwhile, protests demanding a disability income that matches the minimum wage and is accessible to all were organized in several parts of the country.

2023: Equal income, housing and transportation

As the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement waned in 2023 due to severe government repression, protests by individuals with disabilities persisted and became more frequent. In January, the ninth series of nationwide protests took place, advocating for the enforcement of Article 27 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates a monthly stipend of at least the minimum wage. Demonstrations took place in cities including Shush, Sari, Kerman, Chabahar, Tehran, Mashhad, Kermanshah, and Qom, highlighting issues such as unemployment and lack of accessible housing.

On January 22, more than 150 individuals with disabilities and their families gathered outside the Islamic Consultative Assembly in Tehran to protest the removal of dedicated budget allocations for disability services in the upcoming fiscal plan (a topic that will be explored further in the next chapter). A parallel demonstration occurred in Mashhad, where participants expressed similar grievances. Despite a prolonged demonstration in Tehran, no parliamentary representatives engaged with the protesters, although the Deputy Governor assured them that a comprehensive report addressing their issues would be prepared within two to three months.

Other protests that month included a gathering in Shush on January 8, where a group of deaf individuals demanded employment opportunities and housing solutions, and a protest on January 10 in front of the governor's office in Kerman, calling for improved accessibility in public spaces.

In May, protests erupted following [a joint call](#) from the Supreme Association for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled, the Center for Positive Life, and the Campaign for the Disabled. On May 13, they organized a sit-in in front of the Planning and Budget Organization in Tehran. In the weeks leading up to this event, similar protest gatherings had taken place in other cities across Iran. For instance, on March 2, disability activists gathered outside the local Rehabilitation Department in Mashhad to protest the lack of attention to their financial demands.

Summer was also significant for protests. In June, disabled individuals across various cities, including Mashhad, Tehran, and Isfahan, organized gatherings to sign petitions urging immediate action to uphold their legal rights, including the enforcement of Article 27.

On July 8, war veterans protested in Tehran against inadequate pensions.

On August 13, coinciding with International Left-Handers Day, individuals with disabilities gathered in front of Tehran's City Council to protest the malfunctioning Transportation System for Veterans and Disabled Persons, which had severely impacted their mobility. In late August, protests occurred across multiple cities, including Tehran, Ardabil, and Kermanshah, demanding the full implementation of Article 27.

Cross-Over

It is important to note that this analysis focuses on the key motivations behind the protests. Often, there is an overlap in the issues raised, meaning that alongside demands for better access to infrastructure, banners advocating for improved school access for disabled children could also be present.

2024: Equal income, transportation & letter to UN

Similar to 2023, multiple protests took place throughout 2024. On January 14, disabled citizens gathered near the Organization of Planning and Budget to demand better government support and the full implementation of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with a focus on article 27. A week later, another gathering reiterated these demands.

In April, women with disabilities in Karaj protested in front of the City Council, calling for the implementation of Article 2 of the Law, which mandates accessible public transportation.

Disability on Social Media

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for individuals with disabilities to share their personal narratives and raise awareness about their experiences. One prominent voice is Pouya JameKoochi, a young activist who uses his X account to document his life and challenges he faces. Additionally, Iranian journalist Zahra Keshvari has shared the story of Hossein, a young boy with a disability, highlighting the struggles his family faces. Meanwhile, activist Behrooz Morovati shares his experiences [on his Instagram account](#), while the Campaign for the Disabled highlights the various difficulties encountered by persons with disabilities in Iran [on X](#),

On June 14, 2024, a coalition of independent activists sent [a letter](#) to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, criticizing the Islamic Republic for failing to meet its obligations under the convention. The letter highlighted cases of individuals who became disabled due to violence from security forces during the Jina Uprising. While the identities of these activists are kept confidential for security reasons, it was evident that a diverse group of advocates, including those without disabilities, were rallying around the cause of disability rights, further promoting equality and justice for all marginalized communities.

On October 23, Iranians with disabilities held a protest in front of the Planning and Budget Organization in Tehran, demanding the full implementation of Article 27 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They criticized the government's failure to allocate sufficient funds in the 2025 budget to support this law, highlighting ongoing neglect of their rights and needs.

This protest was followed by another demonstration on October 30, when a group of protesters gathered in front of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) in Tehran's Baharestan Square. They protested against the 2025 budget bill, urging lawmakers to uphold Article 27 and provide a livelihood allowance to individuals with severe disabilities who are unemployed and without income. This protest coincided with the parliamentary review of the general budget bill.

The final significant protest of 2024 occurred around the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) on December 3. On December 1, over 800 individuals with disabilities gathered in front of Parliament for a major demonstration. Another significant protest took place on December 3 in front of the Iran International Conference Center, where President Masoud Pezeshkian attended a ceremony commemorating IDPD.

This protest campaign also included a coordinated SMS initiative directed at members of Parliament ahead of a session discussing budget allocations, urging lawmakers to pass necessary legal provisions to ensure the payment of the minimum wage to individuals with severe and very severe disabilities.

Conclusion

Between 2020 and 2024, the number of protests for disability rights increased significantly, reflecting the growing momentum of the movement. Alongside this rise, several important trends emerged. The movement gained visibility through personal stories and influential activists like Behrooz Moravti. Also, protests were increasingly nationally organised while disability activists have started to increasingly make connections with other social justice activists. All in all, this has strengthened the movement for disability rights in Iran, although its successes are ultimately dependent upon corresponding government action.



Behrooz Moravti during one of his protests.



4. Government Responses & Lawmaking

The pursuit of disability rights is closely linked to the degree of flexibility afforded by the state. This chapter examines the Iranian government's approach to requests for disability rights during the specified period. The first section maps and analyzes governmental reactions to disability rights protests, addressing both repressive measures and passive responses, as well as instances where the government showed a willingness to concede to certain demands. The latter part of the chapter explores the legal landscape, focusing on the status of key laws related to disability rights.

Responses to Protests

Suppression

The Iranian government has a documented history of employing scare tactics, unlawful detentions, and prosecutions based on fabricated charges to silence advocacy groups that criticize state policies. Recently, there has been a notable increase in the targeting of disability activists, likely in response to their growing visibility and influence. The following events occurred in 2023 and 2024 respectively:

2023

Scare Tactics

In response to nationwide protests against the non-implementation of Article 27 of the Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities, the government targeted prominent disability activists. On October 11, agents from Iran's Intelligence Ministry raided the home of Behrouz Moravati, director of the Campaign to Pursue the Rights of People with Disabilities. They confiscated personal belongings and attempted to detain him, [but were reportedly unsuccessful due to his physical disability](#). The following day, Moravati, along with Leila Mirkhoshhal, was summoned for questioning at the Intelligence Ministry.

Arrest

On the same day that Moravati and Mirkhoshhal were questioned, Nasser Sargaran, a visually impaired lawyer and university lecturer from Kurdistan, was unlawfully detained by intelligence agents in Saqqez and later [transferred to a detention center](#) in Sanandaj. While many other lawyers defending protesters of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement awaited a similar fate, the timing of Sargaran's arrest suggests that his advocacy for disability rights also played a significant role in his arrest.

Attack

There were also outright attacks on protesters. During the March demonstrations by disabled individuals and managers of rehabilitation centers, security officers not only destroyed the banners held by protesters but also [physically assaulted them](#) while they were chanting slogans.

The protest by dozens of veterans in Tehran on July 8, 2023, which was discussed in the previous chapter, was likewise met with aggressive police action. Officers violently dispersed the rally, reportedly using tear gas against the demonstrators. Many veterans, who suffer from respiratory and lung conditions due to their exposure to chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, were disproportionately affected by the tear gas, despite official denials of its use. Amateur videos circulated online, showing elderly veterans gasping for air on the ground. This incident sparked widespread [outrage on social media](#).

Shooting of Disabled Individual in Saqqez on the Anniversary of Protests

In Saqqez, during the protests at the anniversary of Mahsa (Jina) Amini's death, security forces shot Fardin Jafari, a young man with an intellectual disability. He was hospitalized in critical condition, underscoring the excessive use of force by authorities, even against vulnerable individuals. Authorities claimed he had entered the "forbidden zone".



2024

In 2024, there were also attempts by the Iranian government to hinder disability protests.

Dispersion

On January 14, 2024, police intervened during protests near the Organization of Planning and Budget, where demonstrators were demanding better government support and the full implementation of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Law enforcement officers confiscated loudspeakers and threatened participants with repercussions for future gatherings, effectively silencing their voices.

A week later, on January 21, at a similar protest at the same location, security forces were using physical force to violently disperse the crowd. Behrouz Morvati, the director of the Disabled Persons Campaign was arrested, along with five other activists. They were taken to a police station, where they were coerced into signing commitments to cease their protests before being released.

Severity of Government Responses

While very reprehensible, the Iranian government's response to disability rights protests has been relatively moderate compared to its harsh treatment of political and labor protests. This difference may stem, in part, from concerns that arresting individuals with disabilities could lead to negative public relations for the government. Also, there may be a genuine sympathy for the issues raised by disabled Iranians within certain government circles. An other reason could, however, be that the Iranian regime doesn't consider disability protests as a key threat yet, meaning that responses could be much harsher in the near future.

Beyond attempts to hinder or suppress disability rights protests, the government's response can be categorized into two other types:

Passive

In many cases, the government has adopted a passive stance, taking minimal or no action to disperse gatherings. This suggests an implicit acknowledgment of the validity and legitimacy of these organized protests. However, this passive approach can also result in the ongoing neglect of disability rights demands – even when they are legally justified or despite previous assurances – or mask indifference.

In August 2023, the president Ebrahim Raisi addressed the critical shortage of medications for individuals with specific health conditions. In response to public appeals for essential drugs, President Raisi remarked, "Life and death are in God's hands," a statement that was widely criticized on social media for its perceived insensitivity.

Responsive

While the disability rights struggles outlined in the previous chapter didn't yield any attention-grabbing achievements in the period under study, they were not entirely without effect either. Following a surge in protests and increased public and media scrutiny regarding disability rights, several political actors indicated a willingness to address the demands of the protesters.

- On January 26, 2024, Iran's deputy education minister acknowledged that approximately 30,000 children with disabilities are unable to attend primary schools due to «[deficiencies in the civil registration system that need to be addressed](#)». The timing of this statement, coming after a significant wave of protests, suggests that disability activism played a role in this.
- In February 2024, the Iranian government held its first exclusive employment examination for individuals with disabilities to fulfil Article 15 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which stipulates that 3% of all government jobs must be reserved for persons with disabilities. While the step was hailed as progress in addressing employment disparities, several critical shortcomings have surfaced (see textbox below), raising concerns about its effectiveness.

Shortcomings in Iran's first employment examination

1. Restrictive Eligibility Criteria:

- The examination imposes stringent conditions, such as specific educational qualifications and age limits (typically under 40), which may exclude many individuals with disabilities who have limited access to formal education due to systemic barriers.
- Applicants are required to produce official disability certifications, which, for some, involves navigating complex bureaucratic processes.

2. Inaccessibility of Registration and Venues:

- The online registration system lacks features such as screen reader compatibility for visually impaired individuals or alternative input methods for those with motor disabilities.
- Examination centres are not universally accessible. Reports highlight issues such as:
 - Lack of ramps or elevators for wheelchair users.
 - Inadequate restroom facilities adapted for disabled individuals.
 - Poor transportation access, making it challenging for participants to reach venues.

3. Delayed Implementation of the Law:

- Despite being enacted over five years ago, this is the first significant step toward implementing Article 15. Disability rights activists argue that the government has long failed to prioritize the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in employment.
- Prior to this, most government agencies failed to meet the 3% employment quota, citing budget constraints and infrastructural issues.

4. Insufficient timeframe

In August 2024, the Ministry of Interior issued a directive requiring individuals with disabilities who had passed employment examinations to submit their documents in person in Tehran within a two-day timeframe. This requirement failed to consider the unique travel challenges faced by disabled individuals, leading to further frustration and highlighting systemic insensitivity to their needs.

5. *Tokenism and Publicity Concerns:*

Many activists view the initiative as a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive policy shift. They argue that the lack of accompanying structural reforms—such as workplace accommodations and support systems—will likely undermine the success of those who are employed through this process.

- Following the relatively frequent disability rights protests in 2023, a new registration process was introduced in the second half of 2024. Based on provisions passed in the annual budget, disabled individuals became eligible to receive grant aid of 200 million tomans to purchase or build their homes. Furthermore, the Welfare Organization has pledged that by the end of this year, 20,000 housing units will be made available to disabled Iranians.
- The large protests led by the disability community advocating for economic equality resulted in the passage of a new regulation by Parliament by the end of 2024, requiring the government to pay 75% of the minimum pension to individuals with severe and very severe disabilities. With the minimum pension set at 11,700,000 tomans, this translates to 8,700,000 tomans—slightly more than the minimum wage of 7,166,000 tomans. This marks a step toward fulfilling Article 27. However, this regulation is only applicable for the coming year, while Article 27 does not have such a time limitation. As a result, disabled activists [remain cautiously optimistic](#).
- On the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, celebrated on December 3, president Masoud Pezeshkian expressed the government's readiness to «ease regulations to improve the situation for disabled individuals across the country» during a ceremony in Tehran. He spoke about the rights of persons with disabilities and promised to address their concerns, following repeated calls from protesters to take their needs seriously and criticism of his earlier remarks about disability at the start of his term.

In August 2024, Iran's disability community expressed strong objections to Masoud Pezeshkian's use of derogatory language when referring to individuals with disabilities during a parliamentary session. Despite his medical background, Pezeshkian's remarks were perceived as demeaning, prompting widespread criticism from disability rights activists. During a parliamentary session, President Masoud Pezeshkian used the term "disabled" in a derogatory manner to describe the nation's economic state. This choice of words sparked widespread criticism from disability rights activists, who viewed it as perpetuating negative stereotypes and undermining the dignity of individuals with disabilities. The incident underscored the persistent issue of ableist language in official discourse and the need for greater sensitivity and awareness among public officials.

Lawmaking

The Iranian government's ambivalence toward disability – seeking to minimize or ignore requests for disability rights while simultaneously demonstrating a commitment to them – is also evident in its law-based policymaking.

On one hand, there have been significant advancements. For instance, Iran's first dedicated legislation addressing disability rights, the Comprehensive Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (2004), aimed to support individuals with disabilities by facilitating their access to essential services. While this law marked a significant step forward in recognition, it faced criticism for its charity-based approach and the use of discriminatory language. Following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009, Iran took steps to amend these shortcomings. By 2018, the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted by Parliament, addressing major gaps by increasing disability pensions and extending insurance coverage for disability-related healthcare services.

However, the implementation of this law has fallen short, and recent legislation has diminished some of its potential impact.

Seventh Development Plan

Traditionally, changes to laws in Iran have been significantly influenced by the government's intentions outlined in its five-year development plans. This was also the case for disability rights.

In July 2023, the Iranian government introduced the Seventh Development Plan, a strategic document outlining the country's socio-economic objectives for the next five years. Notably, this plan has drawn criticism from disability rights advocates.

Reduction in Social Support Provisions

Compared to the previous Sixth Development Plan, the new plan significantly reduces the number of articles dedicated to social support, decreasing from 19 to 7. This reduction suggests a diminished governmental commitment to social welfare programs, which are crucial for supporting marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities.

Omission of Disability-Specific Measures

The plan lacks explicit provisions addressing the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Key areas of concern include:

- ***Accessibility***: The plan does not outline strategies to improve access to public spaces, transportation, and information for disabled individuals.
- ***Employment***: There are no targeted initiatives to enhance employment opportunities or workplace accommodations for persons with disabilities.
- ***Healthcare***: The plan fails to address the need for specialized healthcare services and rehabilitation programs tailored to disabled individuals.

New Regulation on Complaints Submission

There was also another legal development hampering disability rights. In April 2024, a directive from the judiciary complicated the process for individuals with disabilities to file complaints against the State Welfare Organization. The new regulation requires complaints to be submitted in person in Tehran, imposing significant logistical challenges for many disabled individuals, especially those living in remote areas.

Payment Transition

Clause 2 of Addendum 8 in the 2024 Budget Law has transferred the responsibility for pension deposits for beneficiaries of the Relief Committee and the Welfare Organization to the Targeted Subsidies Organization. This shift has significantly undermined the interests of disabled Iranians. In May, the pensions of tens of thousands of Welfare Organization beneficiaries—who had been receiving their payments until March—were suddenly cut by the Targeted Subsidies Organization without any explanation. This issue remains unresolved.

Conclusion

Overall, there is sufficient legislation in place to guarantee the rights of disabled Iranians in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, in practice, implementation has been highly problematic, leading activists to refer to it as the «5% situation.» Just as only 5% of the promised housing for disabled people has been realized, most other stipulations in the law remain unmet. Consequently, the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has largely become a paper tiger.

Despite renewed political pledges regarding disability issues amid a rise in disability rights protests, it seems unlikely that significant changes will occur in the short term without government initiative. First, the Iranian government is notorious for making empty promises that are not followed through in the realms of benefits, pensions, and wages. Second, the ongoing economic crisis in Iran, coupled with increased regional conflict, may divert the government's attention away from disability rights. Additionally, the economic crisis may constrain the government's ability to fulfill its commitments to disability rights.

Moreover, the latter part of the president's speech on Disability Day seems to reflect this reality. After acknowledging that the government should do more, Masoud Pezeshkian pointed out that the government is facing multiple problems it "cannot solve by itself" and stated that "the help of the people" would be essential in ensuring disability rights. This underscores the importance of prioritizing disability rights on the agenda, even amid other pressing issues and increasing government action against disability activists. The next chapter will explore potential approaches to address this challenge.



5. Analysis & Way Forward

In recent years, disabled individuals in Iran have transitioned from being largely voiceless to becoming a more vocal minority. This surge in activism has fostered a growing awareness among Iranians regarding the importance of recognizing and advocating for the rights of the disabled community.

However, while the ongoing protests led by Iranian activists—both online and offline—exemplify their courage and determination, the situation for disabled individuals in Iran remains dire.

The current state of disability rights in Iran reveals a stark contrast between legislative intentions and their practical implementation. Although Iran has enacted important laws and ratified international conventions aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, systemic failures—compounded by economic challenges, international sanctions, and deep-rooted societal stigmas—have left millions marginalized and underserved. These issues are interconnected with broader structural deficiencies, including inadequate healthcare access, unaddressed violence and discrimination, and insufficient economic support.

This report emphasizes the urgent need to address these shortcomings through actionable reforms and sustained advocacy. Key steps toward change include enhancing data collection to accurately reflect the scope of disability, enforcing existing laws with accountability mechanisms, and ensuring consistent budget allocations. Given that Iran's economic crisis and soaring inflation disproportionately impact disabled individuals, these measures are more critical than ever.

Ultimately, the path forward necessitates a multifaceted approach that integrates policy enforcement, grassroots empowerment, and collaboration. By prioritizing these efforts, Iran can fulfill its legal and moral obligations to persons with disabilities and cultivate a more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals can thrive with dignity and independence. This moment calls for decisive action to transform advocacy into tangible progress.

The protest of people with disabilities in front of the Parliament in Tehran and Mashhad due to the removal of the budget allocation for the Disability Law.



Recommendations to disability activists in Iran

Based on its experiences with grassroots advocacy and activism in Iran, VA recommends the following:

- **Diversify Advocacy Methods:** In addition to protests, media outreach, and social media engagement, disability activists should consider targeted lobbying efforts directed at relevant political stakeholders, including those at the local level. This approach would help reduce the vulnerability of disability activists to potential government interference in the future.
- **Enhance Protest Organization:** Currently, protests are often conducted in a fragmented and sometimes uncoordinated manner. Investing in sustainable leadership and learning from successful international practices could strengthen these protests, making them more robust and impactful.
- **Create a Collaborative Forum:** Establish a platform for disability activists to share experiences and foster collaboration, including partnerships with viable external organizations.
- **Build International Alliances:** Develop connections with international partners and file complaints with relevant international agencies. In addition to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this could include engaging with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other pertinent bodies that advocate for disability rights.

Recommendations to the international community

In addition to the efforts of domestic parties in Iran, the international community plays a crucial role in supporting Iranian disabled activists in their pursuit of equality. Here are several ways international actors can assist:

1. Diplomatic Engagement:

Encourage diplomatic dialogue with Iranian authorities to prioritize disability rights in discussions on human rights, particularly in international forums.

2. Awareness Campaigns:

Launch international awareness campaigns to spotlight the challenges faced by people with disabilities in Iran. This can help draw global attention to the issue and exert pressure on the Iranian government to take action.

3. Monitoring and Reporting:

Help Iranian CSOs in the establishment of evidence-based mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the status of disability rights in Iran. Collaborating with international human rights organizations can help document abuses and advocate for accountability.

4. Capacity Building:

Provide targeted training and capacity-building programs for Iranian activists and advocacy groups focused on disability rights. Enhancing their skills in advocacy, legal frameworks, and effective communication can amplify their voices and efforts for change.

5. Engage with the UN:

Collaborate with the United Nations and its agencies to ensure that disability rights are included in discussions about human rights in Iran, elevating the issue on the international agenda.



6. Facilitate International Collaboration:

Foster partnerships between Iranian disability rights organizations and international bodies to share best practices, resources, and advocacy strategies.

7. Increase the Visibility of Disabled Iranians Globally:

The international community should promote greater media coverage of organized disability struggles in Iran by connecting with journalists. While international media attention does not guarantee success, it can provide valuable support to disabled activists facing challenging and often dangerous circumstances in their quest for justice in a country where disabled citizens remain heavily marginalized.

By implementing these actions, the international community can strengthen the position of Iranian activists and their allies, potentially paving the way for significant improvements in their livelihoods.

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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