

She Lost Her Career, Family and Freedom. She's Still Fighting to Change Iran.

© [nytimes.com/2023/06/02/world/middleeast/narges-mohammadi-iran-political-prisoner.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/02/world/middleeast/narges-mohammadi-iran-political-prisoner.html)

Farnaz Fassihi

June 2, 2023

By [Farnaz Fassihi](#)

June 2, 2023

When Narges Mohammadi was just a little girl, her mother told her to never become political. The price of fighting the system in a country like Iran would be too high.

That warning has proved prescient.

Ms. Mohammadi, 51, Iran's most prominent human rights and women's rights activist, is now serving a 10-year jail sentence in Tehran's notorious Evin prison for "spreading anti-state propaganda."

Her current imprisonment is hardly her first encounter with Iran's harsh approach to dissent.

Over the past 30 years, Iran's government has penalized her over and over for her activism and her writing, depriving her of most of what she holds dear — her career as an engineer, her health, time with her parents, husband and children, and her liberty.

The last time Ms. Mohammadi heard the voices of her 16-year-old twins, Ali and Kiana, was over a year ago. The last time she held her son and daughter in her arms was eight years ago. Her husband, Taghi Rahmani, 63, also a writer and prominent activist who was jailed for 14 years in Iran, lives in exile in France with the twins.

Image



A family photo of Ms. Mohammadi with her children eight years ago, the last time she was physically with them. They're now 16.

The suffering and loss she has endured have not dimmed her determination to keep pushing for change.

A small window in her cell in the women's ward of Evin opens to a view of the mountains surrounding the prison in north Tehran. Spring brought more rain this year, and the rolling hills were covered with wildflowers.

"I sit in front of the window every day, stare at the greenery and dream of a free Iran," Ms. Mohammadi said in a rare and unauthorized telephone interview from inside Evin in April. "The more they punish me, the more they take away from me, the more determined I become to fight until we achieve democracy and freedom and nothing less."

The New York Times also interviewed Ms. Mohammadi over the telephone in April 2022, when she was granted a brief medical furlough from prison. In March and April of this year, The Times interviewed her by submitting questions in writing and in a surreptitious phone call from inside prison arranged through intermediaries.

Image



Evin prison in Tehran, where Ms. Mohammadi is serving a 10-year sentence for “spreading anti-state propaganda.”Credit...Wana News Agency, via Reuters

Last month, the prison authorities revoked Ms. Mohammadi’s telephone and visitation rights because of statements she had issued from prison condemning Iran’s human rights violations, which were posted on [her Instagram page](#), her family said.

- **A Turkish Cassandra:** Naci Gorur, a geologist, has become a household name in Turkey for imploring the country to prepare for quakes he has predicted. He has been disappointed by the response and is deeply worried about Istanbul.
- **A Baguette Master:** After 17 years in France, the Sri Lankan baker Tharshan Selvarajah has yet to apply for citizenship. But he has made bread for President Emmanuel Macron.
- **India’s ‘Lake Man’:** Anand Malligavad turned to centuries-old knowledge to reclaim dozens of lakes in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru. He is now one of the foremost authorities on lake conservation in one of the most water-stressed countries in the world.

- **From Rock Star to Bodyguard to Filmmaker:** Lynn Lynn was a musical idol when he volunteered in 2015 to protect the life of Myanmar’s new civilian leader. Forced to flee after the 2021 coup, he has reinvented himself as a film director.

PEN America awarded Ms. Mohammadi the Barbey Freedom to Write Award at its annual gala in New York last month. The United Nations named her one of the three recipients of its World Press Freedom Prize this year.

“Narges Mohammadi has been an indomitable voice against Iranian government repression even while being among its most persecuted targets,” said Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch from 1993 to 2022. “She has been unyielding despite repeated imprisonment, continuing her reporting on government abuse even from her prison cell. Her persistence and remarkable courage are a source of inspiration worldwide.”

Image



Taghi Rahmani accepting the Barbey Freedom to Write Award from PEN America on behalf of his wife in May. Credit...Jutharat Pinyodoonyachet for The New York Times

Image



“As a husband and father, I want Narges living with us,” said Mr. Rahmani. “And as her partner in activism, I am obliged to support and encourage her work and elevate her voice.”

Credit...Jutharat Pinyodoonyachet for The New York Times

Ms. Mohammadi grew up in the central city of Zanzan in a middle-class family. Her father was a cook and a farmer. Her mother’s family was political, and after the Islamic revolution in 1979 toppled the monarchy, an activist uncle and two cousins were arrested.

Two childhood memories, she said, set her on the path to activism: Her mother stuffing a red plastic shopping basket with fruit every week for prison visits with her brother, and her mother sitting on the floor near the television screen to hear the names of prisoners executed each day.

One afternoon, the newscaster announced her nephew’s name. Her mother’s piercing wails and the way her body crumpled in grief on the carpet left a lasting mark on the 9-year-old girl and became a driving force for her lifelong opposition to executions.

When Ms. Mohammadi entered college in the city of Qazvin to study nuclear physics, she looked to join women’s student groups, but none existed. So she founded them, first a women’s hiking group and then one about civic engagement.

In college, she met her husband, a well-known figure in Iran’s intellectual circles, when she attended an underground class he taught on civil society. When he proposed, her parents told her a political marriage was destined for doom. Mr. Rahmani spent their first wedding

anniversary in solitary confinement.

Image



Mr. Rahmani and Ms. Mohammadi on their wedding day in 1999.

The couple lived in Tehran, where Ms. Mohammadi created, expanded and strengthened civil society organizations that were working on women's rights, minority rights and defending prisoners on death row.

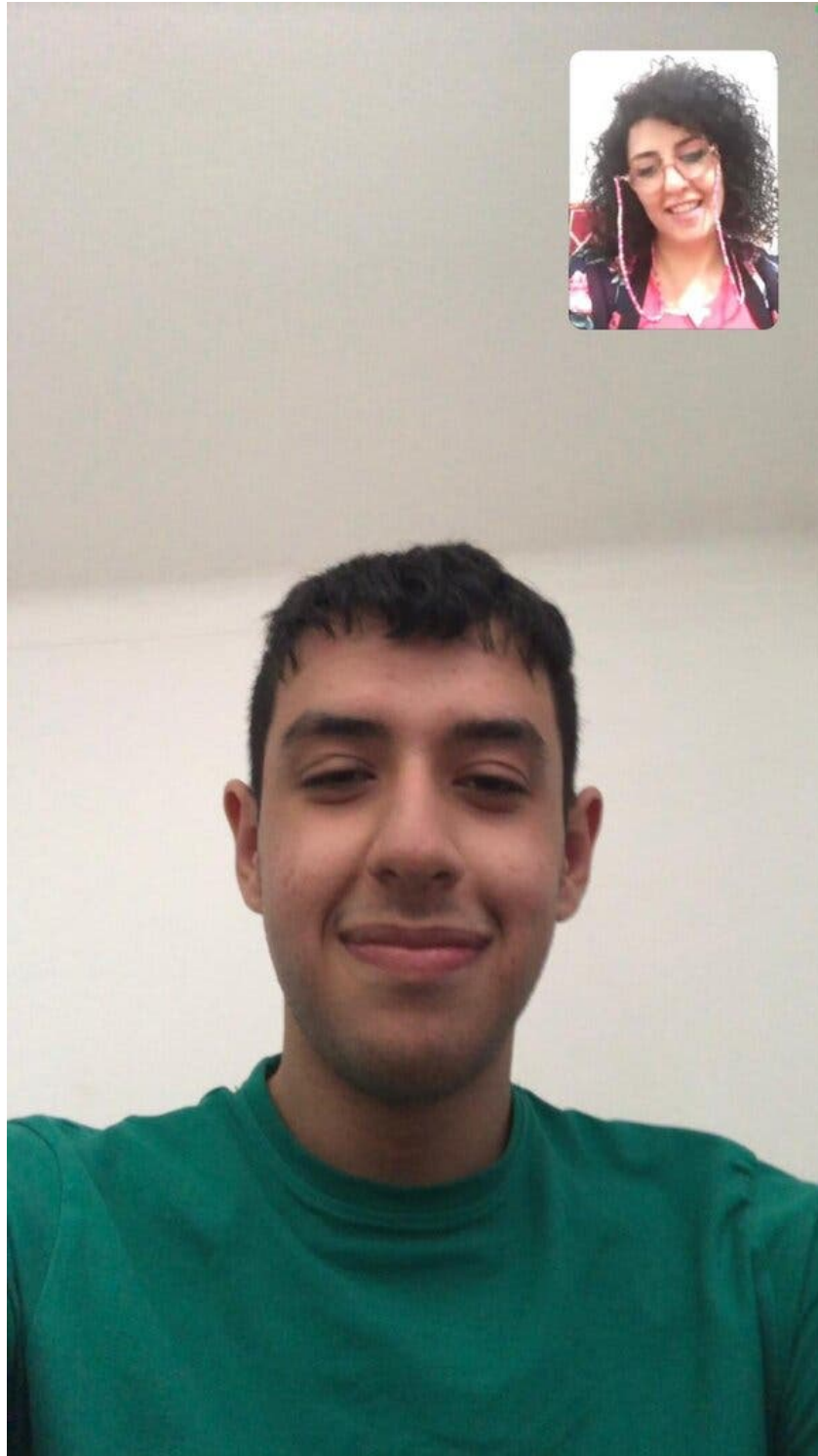
She also wrote columns about women's rights for newspapers and — to earn a reliable income — worked as an engineer for a building inspection firm. The government forced the firm to fire her in 2008.

The judiciary has convicted Ms. Mohammadi five times, arrested her 13 times and sentenced her to a total of 31 years in prison and 154 lashes. Three additional judicial cases were opened against her this year that could result in additional convictions, her husband said.

Their family of four has not been together as a unit, when one parent wasn't in jail or exiled, since the twins were toddlers. Ms. Mohammadi and Mr. Rahmani both said their son often says he is proud of his mother's work, but their daughter has questioned her parents' decision to have children when their activism remained a priority at any cost.

Holidays and birthdays are when the children grieve her absence more intensely, her husband said.

Image



Ms. Mohammadi on a video call with her son, Ali, when she was briefly out of prison last year.

“This separation has been forced on us. It’s very difficult. As a husband and father, I want Narges living with us. And as her partner in activism, I am obliged to support and encourage her work and elevate her voice,” said Mr. Rahmani in an interview in New York when he came to receive the PEN award on her behalf.

Since September of last year, the couple's activism has taken on more urgency. An uprising erupted across Iran, led by women and girls, demanding an end to the Islamic Republic. It was set off by the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, in the custody of the morality police for allegations of violating Iran's hijab rules.

Even from detention, Ms. Mohammadi was encouraging civil disobedience, condemning the government's violent crackdown on protesters, including executions, and demanding world leaders pay attention to Iranians' struggle for freedom.

Her decades-long efforts have helped raise a grassroots awareness in Iran of these issues. For Iran to transform into a democracy, she says, change must come from within the country through the development of a robust civil society.

"Like many activists inside the prison, I am consumed by finding a way to support the movement," she said in the written part of the interview. "We the people of Iran are transitioning out of the Islamic Republic's theocracy. Transition won't be jumping from one point to the next. It will be a long and hard process but the evidence suggests it will definitely happen."

Ms. Mohammadi has always treated prison as a platform for activism and a petri dish for scholarly research. During the uprising, she organized three protests and sit-ins and delivered speeches in the prison yard. The women sang, chanted and painted the walls with slogans, promptly erased by the guards.

Image



Ms. Mohammadi during a furlough from prison last year. Credit...Reihane Taravati

For as long as she has been jailed, she has led weekly workshops for women inmates, teaching them about civil rights.

Ms. Mohammadi's research from prison, based on interviewing inmates, resulted in a book about the emotional impact of solitary confinement and prison conditions in Iran. In December she released a report on the systematic sexual assault and physical abuse of women prisoners.

Her friends and colleagues say Ms. Mohammadi's most remarkable trait is her refusal to be a victim. A trained singer in Persian classical music, she organizes gatherings in the ward where she sings, plays rhythmic tombak on a pot and dances with the other women. In March at Nowruz, the Persian new year, she led a group singing a Persian rendition of the Italian protest song, "Bella Ciao."

"When prison drags on for many years, you have to give your life meaning within confinement and keep love alive," Ms. Mohammadi said. "I have to keep my eyes on the horizon and the future even though the prison walls are tall and near and blocking my view."