

Facilitating Collective Action to Fight Gender Apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan

Proposal Concept: Fighting Gender Apartheid – A Global Call for Justice

Just as the world once united to end racial apartheid in South Africa, today millions of women face a form of gender apartheid, systemic, state-sanctioned discrimination that restricts freedoms, autonomy, and basic human rights based on gender. In countries like Iran and Afghanistan, this is enforced not only through visible measures like compulsory dress codes but more fundamentally through legal, political, and economic barriers. Women face difficulties accessing credit, securing high-level education or employment, and participating in political life.

Our project seeks to foster collective action among diaspora communities, starting with Iranians and Afghans in Paris, to raise international awareness and pressure global institutions to formally **recognise** and **act** against **gender apartheid** as a human rights violation.

By drawing on proven collective action theories as described by experts in social choice theory, such as Amartya Sen¹, Elinor Ostrom², Denis Müller³, Kotaro Suzumura⁴, and Bhaskar Dutta⁵, this initiative will:

- Unite scattered communities around clear, achievable goals related to gender justice and human rights.
- Work towards influencing international bodies such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, or human rights organisations to recognise gender apartheid as a crime against humanity.
- Serve as a pioneering model of grassroots collective action in diaspora contexts, empowering marginalised voices and fostering trust and cooperation.
- Amplify women's voices demanding freedom, dignity, and equality worldwide.

This project invites people from all backgrounds to stand in solidarity with those suffering under gender apartheid, because justice and freedom are universal.

Background & Rationale

Gender apartheid, a systemic, legal, and cultural framework that enforces discrimination against women, is a critical human rights issue affecting millions worldwide. The urgency of addressing this issue has been underscored by **United Nation** (UN) experts, who have stated⁶:

“Gender apartheid is not merely a theoretical possibility or legal construct, but a real threat and lived reality for millions of women and girls around the world.”

In Iran and Afghanistan, this is manifested not only through enforced norms like compulsory hijab, but more deeply through structural barriers that deny women equal access to education, economic stability and political participation. For example, within the punitive laws in Iran, a woman's life is valued at half that of a man's, and women cannot divorce or even travel without the permission of their husband or father. Women in Afghanistan under the Taliban face restrictions far beyond those in Iran.

While citizen initiatives in democratic contexts, such as in the European Union (EU), often work within existing legal frameworks to shift social norms, in authoritarian settings like Iran and Afghanistan, such efforts are inherently political, aiming to challenge and change discriminatory laws. These two contexts differ profoundly in both the nature of the challenges and the state's response, which is supportive in one and repressive in the other. This project recognises these differences and demonstrates that, despite these contrasts, the underlying mechanism of

facilitating collective action, through shared goals, trust-building, and public reasoning, can be effective in both contexts. By successfully organising such an initiative within the diaspora, the **project illustrates that cooperation and collective agency** are possible, even under fragmented and high-pressure conditions, offering a model that opposition actors might adapt for very different strategic needs within Iran.

Indeed, social goals like gender justice are harder to argue against publicly; even those who resist them privately are unlikely to openly oppose them. This creates a space where public discourse can push norms forward and unite diverse voices, including Iranian and Afghan allies, around shared principles of equality.

This project employs the concept of **public reasoning**, as outlined by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Amartya Sen, to promote inclusive dialogue. It also draws on Elinor Ostrom's research on governing the commons to facilitate goal-oriented collective action within a fragmented diaspora community.

Existing Initiatives

Today, several advocacy and research initiatives are already addressing gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan.

Internationally, campaigns such as the *End Gender Apartheid initiative*⁷, *United Against Gender Apartheid* and *Gender Apartheid Inquiry*⁸ bring together Afghan and Iranian activists, lawyers, and global human rights organisations to codify gender apartheid in international law. Amnesty International⁹, Human Rights Watch¹⁰, and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security¹¹ have documented the Taliban's systematic exclusion of women and explicitly linked it to apartheid frameworks. In Canada, groups like *Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan*¹² continue grassroots advocacy, while the Centre for Human Rights in Iran¹³ focuses on documenting discriminatory laws and practices within Iran. Small but significant coalitions, such as the Iranian Diaspora Collective¹⁴, Afghan diaspora advocacy groups, and various grassroots women-led organisations, mobilise around campaigns, conferences, and lobbying efforts, often in fragmented but overlapping ways. The existing initiatives largely emphasise documentation, lobbying, or legal recognition: **our project aims at contributing in complementary ways.**

Our Approach

From advocacy to collective action capacity: France today hosts an estimated 118,000 individuals of Iranian origin and approximately 100,000 Afghans. These communities represent a significant part of the diaspora directly affected by gender apartheid and hold unique potential to mobilise, advocate, and influence public discourse in Europe. Our project focuses on the diaspora as a laboratory for trust-building, cooperation, and public reasoning. Among the diaspora communities, the barriers to collective action stem from a lack of political culture, such as limited experience with organisation-building, institutional engagement, public debate, and the absence of shared civic values. These barriers will be analysed and, by creating structures where fragmented diaspora groups can collaborate around concrete shared goals, we will develop a transferable model of collective agency that will strengthen broader movements for democratic change.

Theoretical grounding with practical application: While many grassroots groups work reactively, this project explicitly grounds its design in the theories of Habermas (public reasoning), Sen (justice and inclusive dialogue), and Ostrom (commons governance). This ensures that practices like consensus-building, resource-sharing, and coalition governance are intentionally structured rather than improvised.

Community Mapping and Engagement: we will start by identifying and connecting with Iranian and Afghan diaspora groups, women's rights activists, human rights NGOs, and sympathetic allies in Paris and internationally. This will result in a small but functional coalition within Iranian and Afghan diasporas to facilitate trust, access, and coordination. By actively implementing mechanisms to foster collective action, we will reinforce trust among this coalition through **achievable initiatives**:

- Launch a pilot campaign focused on one unifying objective: raising awareness of spread of gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan.
- Host workshops to discuss different forms of gender apartheid, aiming to find a common definition among different groups

We will be engaging with experts, scholars and activists to provide credibility and will use social media, cultural centres and local events to foster participation and shared identity.

Short terms single primary deliverable: Grounded in the lived experiences of Iranian and Afghan women, we will focus more specifically in the next 12 months on one **objective**, which is the purpose of the funding sought, and which will unite and strengthen the coalition around an essential and very concrete deliverable. Namely, this primary goal is to **produce a socially rigorous and internationally validated definition of gender apartheid**.

While there are attempts currently underway to legally codify gender apartheid as a concrete crime in the treaty of crimes against humanity, we will be interviewing Iranian and Afghan women of different generations in the diaspora to learn about their experiences and socially validate the legal definition of gender apartheid. This definition will provide the foundation for future advocacy, policy engagement, and international awareness.

The methodology and workplan for achieving this goal are further detailed in the last part of the document. By the end of the year, we aim to have a **2–3 pages social text**, grounded in evidence from interviews and international data and validated by 3 activist groups and experts in the field.

Once formally recognised, we hope this definition can carry the name of **Sarina Esmailzadeh**, in honour of her courage and her story, so that her legacy may live on alongside the efforts of countless others whose lives have come to symbolise the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Medium- and longer-term strategy & outcomes

Strategic Alliances and International Advocacy: building on our primary deliverable, we will partner with international human rights organisations and legal experts to build pressure on bodies like the UN. We will organise joint statements, campaigns, and outreach to politicians in liberal democracies, emphasising the link between human rights and democracy protection.

Beyond the primary deliverable described above, the project will result in an **increased cohesion** and **trust** within the Iranian and Afghan diaspora communities in France, and generate a clear, **replicable model for diaspora-led collective action**, and strengthened liberal democratic discourse through citizen-led engagement. **Maintaining momentum and coordination** will be achieved by developing durable structures, including in-person networks and digital platforms.

Workplan & Timeline (12 Months)

All research activities will comply with GDPR requirements and will follow internationally recognised ethical principles for research involving human participants, including informed consent, confidentiality, and safeguarding. Where relevant, principles reflected in the Declaration of Helsinki will inform our approach to protecting participants' rights and wellbeing. Interviews with women from Iran and Afghanistan will be conducted safely outside their home countries through a professional research firm to ensure methodological rigour and ethical safeguards.

We estimate that 12 months are needed for the project: attempting to compress the different steps would compromise credibility, research quality, and diaspora engagement.

Setup & trust building (3 months): form core team (1 full-time lead, 3 part-time researchers). Map diaspora communities in Paris region. Build initial trust and form coalition. Appoint contract research firm & design methodology.

Research & drafting (6 months): collect structured, ethically conducted testimonies from 100 Iranian and Afghan women, ensuring privacy, safety, and methodological rigor through a professional research firm (e.g., Ipsos-equivalent). Analyse testimonies through the lens of different generations of women and integrate data. Draft an initial definition informed by these testimonies and expert input. Host expert workshops and consultations to refine the draft.

Validation & reporting (3 months): validate the draft with human rights experts, and activists. Finalise the definition and produce a manuscript. Prepare a dissemination plan for NGOs, policymakers, and international advocacy to lay the groundwork for longer term objectives.

Key deliverables by month 12:

- Fully validated social definition of gender apartheid
- Comprehensive report with testimonies, data analysis, and manuscript ready for publication
- Inputs to the model for diaspora engagement
- Foundation for Phase 2: national/international advocacy

Estimated budget

Item	Cost (€)	Notes
Professional Research Firm	12,000	Design of survey/interview framework, methodology guidance
Full-time Lead Salary	59,000	Gross salary for 12 months, including conducting interviews and data collection
Employer Social Contributions	27,000	45% of gross salary
Three Part-time Researchers	0	Volunteer contribution
Crowdfunding Platform Fees	8,000	~ 5% of total raised on GoFundMe
Operational Costs	3,000	Venue rentals, printing, online platform, events, translations
Total	109,000	Adjusted total project cost

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