

Death of Blue Girl shines light on women's rights in Iran

The Open Stadiums movement will mean the death of Sahar Khodayari will not be in vain.

By Samantha Lewis

The Guardian (20.09.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2n2tRwI> – On 9 September, Iranian football fan Sahar Khodayari, nicknamed Blue Girl, died in hospital after setting herself on fire outside a court in Tehran. She had been charged with “appearing in public without a hijab” after trying to enter Azadi Stadium dressed as a man, flouting the nation’s infamous ban on women in sports stadiums.

In an airport transit lounge thousands of kilometres away, as news began to spread of Khodayari’s death, a smartphone began to ping. And ping. And ping.

“When I was travelling, this tragedy happened,” said the woman behind the @openStadiums Twitter account, who declined to be named for security reasons.

“Between my flights, I was talking to media and trying to put the word out. I talked and wrote to several journalists, but my time was short, and I was having lots of anxiety attacks.

“So many journalists sent me messages on Twitter wanting to write about this story, but they just wanted to write about what happened to Sahar. They could just do a Google search to see what happened to her. But it’s really important to write about what was the reason behind what she did. It wasn’t a simple thing.”

The Open Stadiums movement, which describes itself on Twitter as “A movement of Iranian Women seeking to end discrimination & let women attend stadiums,” has been active for almost 15 years.

It began as a small group of female football fans protesting outside Azadi Stadium during a 2005 World Cup qualification match between Iran and Bahrain. Today, it has transformed into a movement for women’s rights in Iran more generally, and become a lightning rod for critical discussions on how football’s governing bodies act on human rights abuses.

“[The year] 2005 was the start of women claiming this right as a woman’s right. For us, it was difficult in several aspects because some other feminists were so against us; they were saying things like ‘in Iran we have much more important issues for women’s rights and this is nothing compared to them’,” Open Stadiums said.

“I think one of the things we tried to show to them is it’s a woman’s right to access any public places, and we achieved this because now it is a top priority of women’s demand for their rights in Iran.”

Before social media became popular, Open Stadiums wrote letters to Fifa and the AFC, demanding action be taken on Iran's violation of human rights. They wrote to domestic and international news outlets, trying to get somebody to listen, but were largely met with silence.

It wasn't until 2013 that the world's media began to take notice. Former Fifa president Sepp Blatter was coming to Iran, accompanied by executive committee member, Moya Dodd, to meet with the country's officials.

"Moya was one of the first supporters of our stadium campaign," Open Stadiums said.

"Everywhere she went, she talked about this problem. At the time, none of the human rights organisations was following our problem. But when Moya talked about it, Human Rights Watch came and supported us. Lots of other human rights organisations and lots of other journalists around the world came. Basically, she connected us to the world of football a lot more.

"I wanted them to know on their official visit that half of this nation wanted to watch football, but they are banned from stadiums. And it happened Sepp Blatter, in his meeting with officials in Iran, he mentioned it. That was a big deal at the time."

But Blatter's pleas were not heeded by Iran's authorities. And despite changes in leadership in both Iran and Fifa over the next few years, little progress was made towards lifting the stadium ban. That's when Open Stadiums took to Twitter.

"[Twitter] is really important. On one hand, lots of Iranian young people are on Twitter. But on the other hand, unfortunately because of language barriers, so many things happen in Iran but few people around the world get to know what's happening. That was my reason to write 90 per cent in English and share the news of what's happening around this campaign," Open Stadiums said.

"Now, I can say maybe 90 per cent of women know about this ban, and even if they don't like football, they want such a barrier [removed] from women in this society."

In 2018, Open Stadiums accompanied several other activists overseas to attend the World Cup in Russia, banners and placards in tow. Whenever the Iranian men's national team played a game, Open Stadiums was there, forcing the world to take notice.

The death of Blue Girl earlier this month once again catapulted Open Stadiums into the spotlight.

In the days following her death, the @openStadiums account was flooded with online support from individuals, clubs and organisations expressing sadness and outrage at the tragedy. A tweet from Khodayari's beloved Esteghlal FC (after whose blue

and white colours she is nicknamed), went viral.

“Our dear Sahar burnt herself to death, when she was charged to 6 month in jail for ... going to the stadium to support her #Esteghlal. She supported us despite the politics made it illegal for her, but what we do can do to support her? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. We are cowards,” @EsteghlalFC_En.

“It is sad for me because I was thinking ‘a girl died, and I got followers.’ It’s such a sad, sad story,” Open Stadiums said.

“Although I was having a terrible time, I feel like it is my responsibility to write about her. I really want to see something good and see justice come out of this tragedy. Just mourning a person is not enough.

“It was difficult even opening my feed because every post was a picture of Sahar. Her eyes looking at you. Everybody was showing their sadness about this tragedy.”

Open Stadiums fears that the nature of today’s news cycle means Khodayari—and the Open Stadiums movement—will slip from view once again.

“When you see some girls putting on beards and male clothes to go to the stadiums, for some people, that’s just a nice photo,” she said.

“But many of these girls went to morality police detention—they sexually assaulted them, they had to be naked, they investigated their private parts. It was a really huge deal, and many of them were under 18 years old.

“Fifa is responsible for Sahar’s death and what us activists are going through. You should see how much pressure Sahar suffered during the time of detention and afterward. Fifa and AFC are completely responsible for these huge problems that are happening. Their lack of effort is threatening other people’s lives.”

For women in Iran, the Open Stadiums movement is about so much more than access to football games. Over the past 14 years, it has become a vehicle for women to re-assert their human rights and take a stand against the oppressive ideologies that have shaped their lives. The world’s media has a responsibility to continue telling their stories. Blue Girl’s death must not be in vain.

“If you come once to Iran and walk in Tehran’s streets, you’ll see that women are fighters here. Every day they are fighting for their rights. They are fighting against compulsory hijab. They are fighting for going to school, to universities, for their jobs; everything,” Open Stadiums said.

“You have to be a fighter because there’s lots of walls in front of you. They want women to be a mother, to stay inside cooking, to be a wife and these kinds of things. But the young generation are vocal, and they really want to claim their

rights.

“And now, with the stadiums, it’s some sort of a symbol for women—if they can go to the stadiums, it means they break one of the walls in front of them. It will happen. You cannot stop us.”