

Iran's #MeToo moment: Women's tweets highlight alleged sexual abuse, rape by prominent figures

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFE/RL (25.08.2020) – <https://bit.ly/32EJNGV> – For 14 years, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatali kept quiet about the time she says a prominent painter sexually assaulted her.

Last week, the U.S.-based educator broke her silence on Twitter, detailing the alleged abuse that took place in the summer of 2006.

Omatali is one of many Iranian women who have in recent days taken to social media to tell their stories of sexual harassment and rape, breaking years of silence about an issue that remains taboo and is often swept under the rug in Iran.

Omatali said she had decided to interview the painter about an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. He insisted that she come to his office first, saying they would go to the exhibition together. After hesitating, she went to his office to find him naked under a brown cloak.

He then assaulted her, she said.

“He held me tightly, squeezing my body and trying to kiss my lips; I struggled as hard as I could to get rid of him,” she wrote on Twitter.

Omatali managed to escape into the street. The painter later came out and acted as if nothing had happened.

“He came toward me and said: ‘Shall we?’”

“It was as if I had no will of my own. I went,” Omatali said, adding that she still becomes full of “hatred, fear, and helplessness” when she recalls that day.

Spotlight on abuse

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

One woman said she was raped by a friend after she visited him at his apartment. She had a glass of wine and woke up the next morning in his bed, naked, she said.

Others came forward claiming they had been raped by the same man, accusing him of drugging them beforehand.

Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi said on August 25 that the man identified by the initials "KE" had been arrested after several women said they were raped by him.

Several others accused a known visual artist, as well as a popular writer, while at least one spoke of past sexual misconduct by a prominent filmmaker.

Some named their abusers publicly, others alluded to their identities. Several men also joined the campaign, tweeting about their experience with sexual abuse.

Fashion photographer Reihaneh Taravati said she had been sexually harassed by "one of the pioneers of Iranian photography" when she was 19, while artist Leva Zand wrote how her friend had been raped by a man whom she described as a well-known, New York-based, Iranian human rights activist.

At least one woman recounted how she sought legal action against her perpetrator that resulted in the punishment of her offender.

Several lawyers offered tips and legal advice to Iranian women who face discriminatory Islamic laws enforced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that often favor men.

The global #metoo movement led to the downfall of a number of prominent figures, including the famous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, who is now in prison in New York.

The Iranian #metoo movement, which has resulted at this time in the arrest of one alleged rapist, appears to have empowered abuse survivors who had remained silent for years and, in some cases, blamed themselves for the predatory behavior of their abusers.

Omatali told RFE/RL she decided to publicize her alleged sexual harassment after reading some of the anonymous accounts of abuse that have been posted on social media in the past two weeks.

"I thought to myself, 'you're in the United States and have more freedom and protection than those in Iran to raise the issue publicly, why are you silent?'"

"I didn't find an answer that would satisfy me, and so despite the pressure and anxiety I knew I would face, I decided to write about my experience, hoping that it would be a starting point for the publicizing of similar incidents," Omatali said.

Absence of education

She expressed hope that the ongoing campaign will lead to

increased awareness among people about the problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

“In the absence of systematic education about sexual issues in Iran, this group movement improves the atmosphere for a public discussion and creates a precious opportunity for education,” Omatali said.

Sexual abuse is believed to be widespread in Iranian society, where women often complain about being sexually harassed on the streets in the form of catcalling and groping.

Many women have also recounted in past days about being sexually assaulted at work while having no choice than to stay in contact with the offender, who is quite often the boss or a colleague.

Tehran-based sociologist Saeed Madani told RFE/RL’s Radio Farda that in Iran, like other countries, many victims of sexual abuse and rape are reluctant to speak out.

“They aren’t usually inclined to seek legal action, therefore the number of cases that are referred to the [authorities] is very limited and those very limited cases are not publicized,” he said.

Madani referred to rape figures reported by the media as “the tip of the iceberg,” saying the majority of the cases are not being reported.

“One report said that the highest incidents of rape are in Tehran, with about 1,600 sexual crimes being registered annually, but it is estimated that some 80 percent of rape cases are not being reported,” he said.

One reason is the taboo surrounding the issue while victim blaming is also preventing women from coming forward.

“In a patriarchal society, it is assumed primarily that the woman has done something wrong,” Madani said.

Veteran women’s rights advocate Susan Tahmasebi told RFE/RL that the current movement against sexual abuse and rape is likely to encourage more survivors of abuse to seek legal action.

“Already we see that the recounting of these stories has brought about change,” Tahmasebi said. “Besides raising awareness among women survivors of rape and sexual assault, sending them the message that they are not to blame and that they will be safe in coming forward.”

“It tells men that they can no longer continue their violent behavior against women with full impunity,” she added. “At least in the eyes of the community they will lose face and this has already happened in the case of some high-profile men.”