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# Gendered Violence under Biopolitics in *White Torture*: A Critical Reflection on Human Rights Violations in Iran's Prisons

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### Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of gendered violence, biopolitics, and human rights violations against women prisoners in Iran, as documented in Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture*. The study argues that the Iranian state uses gender-targeted psychological torture as a tool of political repression, exerting control over both the bodies and agency of women detainees. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," the paper examines how state power erases women's identities and silences their voices within the prison system. Besides, human rights frameworks are used to demonstrate how these acts of violence represent severe human rights violations, especially toward women, by employing isolation and psychological abuse as tools of dehumanisation. This reflection on *White Torture* makes a significant contribution by drawing the attention of international human rights agencies to these abuses, emphasising the urgent need to advocate for the protection and dignity of women political prisoners.

*Keywords:* Gendered violence, biopolitics, human rights, Iranian prisons, political repression

### Introduction

*White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners* by Narges Mohammadi is a heartbreaking account of the suffering endured by women imprisoned for their political beliefs in Iran. Under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, these

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women are subjected to systematic psychological torture and extreme isolation in solitary confinement. This work unfolds the dark reality of Iran's prison system, where women's basic human rights are suspended, and they are reduced to tools of political oppression. The book not only documents these abuses but also urges the global community to acknowledge and act against these injustices. This book highlights the deeply-rooted gender discrimination in Iranian laws and societal practices that systematically undermine women's autonomy and agency. Women face restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, education, and employment. In prison, these restrictions become even harsher, with women subjected to psychological abuse, isolation, and humiliation. These tactics simply break their spirit, silence them, and leave them vulnerable, hopeless and hapless.

Applying Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," this paper examines how Iran's prison system reduces women prisoners of conscience to a state of existence where their rights and dignity are completely denied. It sheds light on how gendered violence is used as a tool of political repression, turning these women into what Agamben terms "homo sacer" – life that can be controlled, abused, and violated without consequence. Through the perspective of human rights, this study emphasises the urgent need for international advocacy to end the dehumanisation of women prisoners of conscience and to restore their dignity and rights in Iran.

### **Gendered Violence in Iran**

Numerous scholars, critics, and researchers have examined the inhumane and brutal prison system in Iran, highlighting various forms of human rights violations. These violations include physical abuse and psychological torture, often targeting political prisoners and critics of the state. In *A Study of Gender Apartheid: Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Safaeimojarad Golazin examines the systematic discrimination against women, known as gender apartheid. She focuses on how this practice, prevalent in Afghanistan and Iran, subjugates women and denies them basic rights through deeply-rooted institutional structures. She argues that "gender apartheid is not only a direct product of governmental laws but is

deeply intertwined with cultural and religious norms that perpetuate women's inferior status" (2). She further notes that "these cultural norms and values, often articulated through a strict interpretation of religious edicts, dictate traditional gender roles and expectations, exacerbating women's subordinate status" (5). Her analysis makes clear that dismantling gender apartheid requires more than revising discriminatory laws. It also demands confronting the cultural and religious beliefs that legitimise women's subordination and allow legal inequality to persist. By linking ideology with state policy, she shows how these mutually reinforcing systems create a durable structure of gendered oppression that cannot be undone through legal reform alone.

The 2013 Human Rights Report on Iran sheds light on the extensive human rights violations occurring within Iranian prisons, particularly focusing on the use of torture. It describes the common methods of abuse that include prolonged solitary confinement, rape, sexual humiliation, threats of execution, sleep deprivation, and repeated beatings. The report highlights overcrowded prisons and the frequent denial of medical care, increasing detainees' hardship and suffering. These reports reveal the harsh conditions prisoners face and bring systemic abuse in the country's penal system to the fore. The same report refers to "white torture," a method of psychological abuse used in prisons in which physical violence is not the primary tool; instead, sustained mental suffering is employed to break a person's sense of self. According to the report:

Some prison facilities, including Evin Prison in Tehran, were notorious for cruel and prolonged torture of political opponents of the government. Authorities also allegedly maintained unofficial secret prisons and detention centers outside the national prison system where abuse reportedly occurred. The government reportedly used "white torture," a type of psychological torture that includes extreme sensory deprivation and isolation, especially on political prisoners and often in detention centers outside the control of prison authorities, including Ward 209 of Evin Prison, which news organizations and human rights groups reported was under the control of the country's intelligence services. (U.S. Department of State 6-7)

The report emphasises psychological violence as a major tool of abuse. "White torture" involves sensory deprivation, solitary confinement, and extreme isolation, all of which severely affect the

mental health of prisoners. This form of violence can lead to long-lasting trauma, as it deprives individuals of their basic human rights, such as the right to social interaction, information, and basic sensory experiences. Such violations undermine the dignity of individuals and the integrity of the body and mind.

Ahmad Mohammadpour, in “Decolonizing Voices from Rojhelat: Gender-Othering, Ethnic Erasure, and the Politics of Intersectionality in Iran,” discusses how women, especially from ethnic minorities like the Kurds experience specific forms of gendered violence. This violence is often tied to both patriarchal structures and the broader political repression in Iran. Women face not only physical abuse but also psychological violence that is often intensified by their ethnic identity. The article also brings in the idea that the Iranian state seeks to erase Kurdish culture and identity in favour of a more homogeneous national identity. This cultural violence marginalises the Kurdish language, traditions, and history, making it difficult for individuals to assert their ethnic identity without facing repression. As the critic argues, “for marginalised and minoritised ethnic-nations in Iran, gender oppression always intersects with ethnoreligious and linguistic forms of suppression” (16). From an intersectional perspective, Kurdish women face double marginalisation due to their gender and ethnicity. This lens shows how gendered violence in the region is both personal and political, worsened by national policies oppressing women and ethnic minorities. The article emphasises the dark side of gendered violence in Iran.

According to a 2021 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), the authorities regularly prosecute women for so-called “morality crimes” (21), including the failure to adhere to Islamic dress codes in Iran. HRW further highlights the prosecution of women’s rights activists such as Yasaman Ariayi, Saba Kordafshari, and Farhad Meysami, who have been penalised for peacefully protesting against Iran’s compulsory hijab laws. Moreover, the Iranian legal system offers no protection for women against spousal rape or domestic violence. Consensual sex outside of marriage is criminalised, with punishments like flogging. This makes female rape victims at risk of prosecution if they report their assault, particularly if authorities

doubt their testimony. Consequently, many women are arrested each year for engaging in consensual sex or for being victims of rape.

In “Women as Human Rights Defenders at Risk - A Present Case Example,” Siroos Mirzaei, Jan Kizilhan, Reem Alksiri, and Thomas Wenzel note on the plight and predicament of women human rights defenders (HRDs) in Iran, particularly those imprisoned for their beliefs and activism as prisoners of conscience. These women activists advocating for gender equality, freedom of expression, or political reform face severe repression in Iran’s prison system. The critics, here, refer to Narges Mohammadi and the severe repression she has endured under the Iranian regime for her advocacy of human rights and women’s freedom. They foreground how she receives white torture from the regime “in which prisoners are systematically held in solitary confinement for an unknown period of time without even access to a lawyer, under harsh conditions such as being exposed to light or noise all the time, etc.” (2). This type of “white torture” silences and isolates female prisoners, denying them basic legal and psychological support, which deepens their suffering and exposes systemic gender inequality in punitive systems.

The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) report, released on September 13, 2024, examines the situation in Iran, particularly during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement and the September 2022 protests. The report also shows a rise in state-sponsored gendered violence, specifically the use of excessive force by Iranian security forces against women and girls. These individuals are often targeted for not following mandatory hijab laws, using physical violence as a means of control. These women are subjected to violence such as beatings and slapping. The Iranian government has also implemented heightened surveillance measures to monitor hijab code, utilising technologies such as drones and surveillance cameras both in public spaces and private settings. The report highlights the government’s increased repression through legislative measures like the “Hijab and Chastity” Bill, which would impose harsher penalties on women who defy hijab laws, including fines, longer prison sentences, travel bans, and limited access to education and employment.

The findings of the report reveal a systematic pattern of state-sponsored violence and surveillance targeting women, showing how technology is increasingly used to control their behaviour and suppress dissent. Scholarly analyses further demonstrate how legal, cultural, and political structures intersect to sustain gendered oppression in Iran. From psychological abuse in prisons, including “white torture,” to the state’s enforcement of morality laws, women’s bodies and freedoms remain tightly restricted. The evidence underscores an urgent need for stronger human rights protections to safeguard women from both direct abuse and broader structural oppression.

### **Reflections on Biopolitics: Power, Identity and the Body**

Michel Foucault advances the concept of “biopolitics” in his book *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. He explains that modern power not only punishes people but also shapes their lives by controlling bodies, identities, and everyday behaviour. Foucault introduces the ideas of “biopolitics” and “biopower” to show how power decides who is heard, who suffers, and who is disappeared. This view is very different from earlier ideas that treated politics as something separate from life. For Foucault, biopolitics helps us understand how governments and institutions try to manage life itself through health systems, population control, and different forms of monitoring.

Foucault’s concept of biopolitics highlights the systematic governance of life. Beginning in the seventeenth century, this form of power developed into two interconnected modes that “constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations” (139). The first pole “centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities...all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterised the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body” (139). The second pole “focused on the species body...Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population” (139). Together, these poles show how biopolitics shapes individual behaviour and manages populations through subtle, pervasive mechanisms.

Foucault's framework of biopolitics provides a critical lens to understand the systematic control and subjugation described in Narges Mohammadi's *White Torture*. The Iranian prison system, as Mohammadi documents, exerts power not only through overt physical punishment but through psychological techniques: solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, and prolonged isolation that resemble the "subtle, pervasive mechanisms" Foucault associates with biopolitical control (139). These strategies regulate the bodies and minds of female prisoners, denying them basic human rights such as social interaction, legal representation, and psychological support. By shaping behaviour, enforcing conformity, and silencing dissent, the prison system demonstrates the two aspects of biopolitics: disciplining individual bodies and controlling populations. Mohammadi's accounts show the human cost of this control, revealing women's suffering and how these mechanisms maintain oppression, fear, and social marginalisation.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life extends Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics by showing how political systems can strip individuals of rights and recognition, reducing them to mere biological existence. Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, develops a compelling theory connecting politics and life, emphasising the "hidden point of intersection between the Juridico-institutional and biopolitical models of power" (6). He begins by distinguishing between two forms of life in classical Greek thought: *zoe*, the natural life shared by all living beings, and *bios*, the qualified life associated with individuals who hold value and status in the political sphere. In ancient Greece, *zoe* was excluded from the political realm (*polis*), while *bios* was privileged.

However, in modern times, Agamben argues, this distinction has shifted as *zoe* becomes entangled with state power, where "natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power" (3). Despite its inclusion, *zoe* remains subordinated under sovereign control. Its inclusion is paradoxical, functioning through what Agamben calls "inclusive exclusion." This means that *zoe* is acknowledged within the political sphere only to stress her subjugation and inferiority. The sovereign, who holds ultimate

authority, decides the fate of natural life, which is both essential for politics and excluded from full political participation. This dynamic renders human lives expendable, highlighting how *zoe* is incorporated into the political structure while being denied autonomy and agency.

Agamben asserts that this “inclusive exclusion of *zoe* in the polis” (7) is central to modern biopolitics, where life itself becomes the focus of political control. This interplay between inclusion and exclusion reveals the mechanisms of power that define modern political life, as sovereign power depends on subordinating natural life to sustain its authority and relevance. Agamben’s ideas on biopolitics show how power affects people’s bodies in modern society. The state controls areas such as health, reproduction, and freedom, shaping people’s identities and experiences. This control highlights the struggles individuals face as they face societal expectations and fight for their rights. Understanding biopolitics reveals the need to challenge these power structures to create a fairer society where everyone can shape their own identity.

Agamben’s concept of “bare life” builds on Foucault’s idea of biopolitics by showing how political systems can strip people of rights and recognition, reducing them to mere biological existence. In *White Torture*, Mohammadi shows how Iranian women prisoners face prolonged isolation, sensory deprivation, and psychological abuse, effectively being treated as “bare life”. Denied legal protection, social interaction, and basic dignity, these women live under conditions where the state controls their very existence, showing how both sovereign and disciplinary power work to make certain lives vulnerable and marginalised.

### **Biopolitics and Gendered Violence in *White Torture***

Narges Mohammadi’s *White Torture* is a harrowing account of the systemic abuse and dehumanisation faced by female political prisoners in Iran’s prisons. Through personal interviews and firsthand accounts, Mohammadi exposes the brutal mechanisms of control used by the Iranian regime to suppress dissent, particularly against women who challenge its authority. As an advocate for human rights and a prominent voice against the death penalty,

Mohammadi critiques the violent, patriarchal structures upheld by extremist Islamist ideologies. Her narrative reveals a stark contrast between the regime's oppressive moral codes and a counterculture supporting liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness.

This analysis explores *White Torture* through the dual lens of biopolitics and gendered violence, arguing that the regime's control over prisoners exemplifies biopolitical power, where bodies and lives are manipulated for political dominance. It also shows that gendered violence is key to this control, strengthening patriarchal hierarchies and silencing women's resistance. Mohammadi's work, thus, becomes a crucial text for understanding the intersections of state power, gender and human rights violations in contemporary Iran.

*White Torture* is a compilation of "interviews conducted by Narges Mohammadi with women who were (and are) incarcerated for holding religious, ethical, and political beliefs that do not conform to the repressive conditions of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (*White Torture* xxxvi). These testimonies expose the biopolitical mechanisms of the Iranian regime, where the state exerts control over the lives and bodies of female prisoners, regulating their beliefs, actions, and even their identities to maintain political power. The book explains white torture thus:

White torture deprives prisoners of all sensory stimulation over long periods, and this is applied to prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, alongside the techniques of solitary confinement and interrogation. The state often incarcerates people outside the formal judiciary system, meaning that they are in prison without trial, and the victim therefore is aware that there is no impartial court to which they can appeal. Incarceration without trial is used as weapon of torture and operation..... White torture is inflicted through the architecture of prison, the conduct of the staff and the interrogators' questions. (6)

White torture involves isolating prisoners and depriving them of all sensory input for extended periods. It is commonly used on political prisoners and those detained for their beliefs, often alongside solitary confinement and interrogation. The state also detains people without trial, leaving them with no legal recourse or hope for a fair hearing. The methods of white torture are reinforced by the prison's design, the behaviour of prison staff, and the nature of

the interrogators' questioning, all contributing to the psychological and emotional torment of the prisoners of conscience.

The writer recounts her arrest, during which she was charged with "propaganda against the regime" (30). She describes the experience of being blindfolded and transported through various locations before ultimately being confined "to a small solitary cell" (16). This narrative highlights the oppressive tactics used by the authorities to break the spirit of detainees, using psychological and physical methods like sensory deprivation and isolation to maintain control.

Nigara Afsharzadeh, a citizen of Turkmenistan, recounts her harrowing interrogation experience after being accused of espionage by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. She describes being taken to an interrogation cell in Tehran thus:

The first day that they took me to the interrogation cell in Teheran there were two interrogators: one young and one relatively middle-aged. They said that this was the end. 'Think that this is the grave?' 'They said, 'You are dead, and we are Munkar and Nakir'<sup>1</sup>..... I was worried about my children. I was told that they had been left in the middle of the street and had to be taken to an orphanage. Distressed, I did not know what to do. I did not touch the food. They would get angry and say, 'Are you on strike?' (55-56)

This account unpacks the psychological and emotional manipulation used during interrogations, emphasising the role of fear, isolation, and the threat to loved ones as tools of coercion in oppressive regimes.

Hengameh Shahidi, another prisoner of conscience, was sentenced to six years in prison for charges including "gathering and colluding with intent to harm state security" and "insulting the head of the state" (136). She describes her traumatic experiences in solitary confinement and during interrogation. In the cell, "They didn't pay slightest attention to my physical condition. I had had heart disease before the arrest and because of the beatings I suffered anxiety attacks. When they took me to the ward's medical clinic, they kept me in bed for about four or five hours, I was in an awful physical condition" (138). Her account brings in the brutal methods used to break down political prisoners. The combination of isolation, the

pressure of false accusations, and harsh interrogation tactics reveal the extensive use of biopolitical control in oppressive regimes, where the state seeks to dominate both the body and mind of its detainees.

Shahidi vividly recounts the brutalities inflicted by interrogators, detailing their methods of psychological and physical torment. She describes instances of sexual harassment directed at both herself and her cellmate, highlighting the deeply humiliating and traumatic nature of these encounters: "... a person called 'doctor' would also join the interrogations. He tried to act as if he had fallen in love with me... He sexually harassed her multiple times – asking her how much her breasts cost and putting 5,000 toman notes on them" (142). Shahidi's account of sexual harassment in Iranian prisons illustrates how biopolitical power controls women's bodies. The interrogators manipulated and abused prisoners, exerting authority over their actions, identities, and dignity. This testimony shows how gendered violence in prisons is not merely incidental but central to the mechanisms of state control.

Andre Duarte, in "Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence: The Arendtian Critique of the Present," argues that "states have enacted repressive policies against immigrants and refugees, political movements that organize the unemployed, non-conformists of all sorts, displaced and homeless people, among many other undesirable social groups" (2). This perspective supports the concept of white torture discussed in *White Torture* by Narges Mohammadi. In the context of biopolitics, both Duarte and Mohammadi highlight how marginalized groups, whether refugees, political dissidents, or women prisoners, are subjected to state violence and control.

Similar to how women prisoners in Iranian cells experience repressive power structures, non-conformists in society such as political dissidents, refugees, and marginalized groups are often subjected to state control, imprisonment, and torture to maintain authority. These tactics are not just about punishing individuals but are also about silencing opposition and exerting power over those who challenge the state's norms. Just as authorities use psychological and physical violence to break the spirit of political prisoners, such practices form part of a broader biopolitical strategy to control and eliminate any potential threats to state power.

Shahidi, a prisoner of conscience, recounts the horrors of solitary confinement for herself and her fellow prisoner, describing it as “a place of torture... beatings, obscenities, and hunger strikes... the lights... deprived me of sleep... I endured vulgar words and sexual insults” and recalling how she was “completely disturbed when I heard the cries and lamentations of ISIS in nearby cells” (154–155). Shahidi’s account of solitary confinement exemplifies Agamben’s idea of “bare life”, where prisoners are reduced to mere survival, deprived of rights and recognition. The constant lights, sleep deprivation, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and hunger strikes show the state’s biopolitical control, as Foucauldian theory explains, regulating bodies through discipline and psychological pressure. The fear, distress, and cries from nearby cells reveal how power dominates life itself, turning prisoners into objects of control while erasing their social and political agency.

Another prisoner of conscience, Sedigheh Moradi, arrested for joining anti-regime groups, recounts the physical and psychological torture she endured in solitary confinement: she was “pulled by arms and legs and tied... the cables hit the soles of my feet... I fainted and they poured water on me... I could not stand, but they forced me” and heard “the voices of elderly mothers... questioned about their children’s hiding places” (186). Moradi’s narrative reveals how biopolitical power targets individuals as bodies to be controlled, using physical and psychological harm to suppress dissent. Women experience gendered suffering, such as manipulation through their roles as mothers, highlighting the intersection of state control, patriarchy, and dehumanising practices in authoritarian regimes.

Nicholas Chare, in “The Gap in Context: Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*,” explains Agamben’s concept of “homo sacer” or “bare life” as “a liminal state occurring between *bios* and *zoe*, between life styled by law and natural life, between language and non-language,” with “the most extreme example of bare life in the camps... embodied by the *Muselmann*” (45). The *Muselmann* were prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who were physically and mentally reduced to extreme weakness and exhaustion. They were alive but deprived of social, legal, and moral recognition. They could not act, speak, or assert themselves, existing only to survive. Chare

explains that bare life is not just biological existence but a state between social life, shaped by laws and society, and natural life. The *Muselmann* exemplifies this condition, as their humanity was systematically destroyed while they remained under total control of the camp system.

In *White Torture*, a similar form of bare life emerges through the mechanisms of biopolitical control. Women prisoners of conscience in Iran are subjected to physical and psychological violence, including solitary confinement, interrogation, and surveillance, which reduce them to bodies under the state's control. The state enforces strict gender norms and legal restrictions that exclude these women from full social and political participation. Like the *Muselmann* in Nazi camps, their humanity is constrained, their agency limited, and their existence is marked by vulnerability and survival under constant domination.

## Conclusion

In *White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners*, Narges Mohammadi exposes how gendered violence functions as a tool of biopolitical control in Iranian prisons, reducing women prisoners of conscience to a state of extreme vulnerability similar to Agamben's concept of "bare life". The Iranian state employs psychological and physical torture to dominate women's bodies, silence their voices, and erase their agency, demonstrating a systematic form of political repression. This intersection of gendered violence, biopolitics, and human rights violations shows the extreme oppression faced by women prisoners and emphasizes the urgent need for global attention and action. By revealing the lived experiences of these women, *White Torture* not only documents human rights abuses but also amplifies the call for justice, equality, and the protection of women's dignity under authoritarian regimes.

## Notes:

- 1 Munkar and Nakir are two angels who question the deceased on their faith in Islam.

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