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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“SING IT OUT LOUD” BY GOLA

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



I was arrested many times. Detained for a strand of hair escaping from my hijab, or because I sat next to a boy or went to a student party. They tried to arrest me once (and my mum!) as we celebrated a football victory. This was before I even announced my calling as a pop singer. Since the Iranian Revolution (1979,) we females are forbidden to sing solo and to make sure we comply, we have an entity called the Morality Police as well as a Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Rules and regulations apply with such punishing details and almost perverted minutiae that one must wonder:
why are women so deeply feared?



When I turned nine years old, my gender felt like a damning fact, the justification for a lifelong arsenal of restricted freedoms. I could no longer dance, sing, no longer run around or ride my bike, make friends with boys – even those in my close family. **My uniform of decency (that's what they call it) left nothing to imagination. I had to cover my hair and I had to wear trousers and a long shirt and a coat, loose fit. There was no room for my personality.**

Not playing by the rules, however absurd, got you lashed or imprisoned.

Thankfully, my family supported me, since the price to be a girl was so high, they turned me into a boy. That was it. I was free again. It worked, until nature interfered and my breasts became impossible to hide, and I felt trapped and depressed I had learnt to sing and play a variety of musical instruments from the age of five, keeping to the art of traditional Iranian music which I studied at the University of Teheran.



At 18, I joined the first Iranian all-female band named Orchid. We could only perform for other women who had to sit still, never allowing their bodies to swing to the music. A drink to get you in the mood was worth 80 lashes.

It would be funny if it wasn't tragic because of the impact surveillance has on the lives of female artists in my country.

Exile was a painful decision. I moved to London on a one-way ticket living on £10 per week doing odd jobs, playing music whenever possible. I felt incredibly alone – But I also felt as if someone had opened a door to the rest of my life. There is no way back and this isn't only about me. We, women, are moving forward and can't be stopped. We are getting stronger, from Saudi Arabia to Iran, we are finding our voice and we don't want to whisper and hide anymore. No-one should tell us what to wear, what to say or what to do.

We deserve respect. This is what my songs are about.

