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Alumni and former staff member establish fellowship for Iranian women

She was a young Iranian woman on vacation — just days before starting college — who died while detained by the country's morality police. Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022 set off women-led protests across the country and brought international attention to the dangers women face in Iran. Inspired by these events, UC Santa Barbara's tight-knit Iranian community has created a path for women like Amini to pursue graduate studies at UCSB.

"I grew up in Iran with all the gender apartheid that the Islamic Republic is forcing on women," said Salva Salmani-Rezaie, who completed her doctoral studies in material science at UC Santa Barbara in 2021. "And still, I always thought that the only way out for women in countries like Iran is through education." Salmani-Rezaie is now a Kavli postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University and will join The Ohio State University's faculty next fall.

Shortly after Amini's death was reported, Salmani-Rezaie, Mohamad Nasr-Azadani Ph.D. '13, and another Ph.D. alum who requested to remain anonymous, along with retired staff member Venus Nasri, came together to create the Mahsa Amini Graduate Fellowship for Iranian women studying non-STEM fields at UCSB. They secured initial funding from UCSB's alumni community with donors from the world over.

The group decided to target non-stem majors, fields that are often inaccessible to Iranian students, particularly women. Of the dozens of recent Iranian graduate students at UCSB, nearly all have been in STEM fields, noted Nasr-Azadani, who studied mechanical engineering.

“You have seen the value of the left brain of Iranian society, which is logic, engineering and science, but not the right brain,” he said. “The right brain is what you’re hearing now in the news: the passion that women have, the leadership they have taken, the beauty of the innovation they have taken in the demonstration.” Nasr-Azadani now works in applied research focused on artificial intelligence at Accenture Labs in San Francisco.

Most of the initial funding was raised in a GoFundMe campaign that Salmani-Rezaie and Nasr-Azadani created, pulling in over $13,000 from friends, family and fellow alumni. Meanwhile, Nasri helped bring the proposal to UCSB’s Division of Student Affairs, where she worked for many years, connecting the fellowship to the university. Though retired from UCSB, Nasri continues to volunteer as a lead advisor for graduate students in the Islamic Society of Santa Barbara. Her years-long involvement and support in the Iranian student community brought her into the lives of both Salmani-Rezaie and Nasr-Azadani when they were students.

“Well, I was an international student myself and I know how difficult it can be because you're away from your homeland,” Nasri said. “Iranians are very attached to their families, parents and friends. And then when I was at Student Affairs, one of the questions that we would ask undergrads was: ‘How did you manage your freshman year?’ And then I was thinking, do they ask the same question to international and graduate students? And I said, ‘Well, I want to be that person. I want to be the person who they come to if they have a problem.’”

The fellowship was set up at UCSB with the support of Interim Graduate Dean Leila Rupp and Assistant Dean John Lofthus.

“The Mahsa Amini Fellowship is world-changing in so many ways,” said Rupp. “It honors not just the death of one woman, but the courage of all the Iranian women and others who take to the streets in protest. Here on campus, it honors the Iranian community of faculty, staff and students who, in the face of oppression back home and anti-Iranian sentiment in the U.S., bravely go about their work and studies. And it recognizes what Iranian graduate students bring to our university community,

from the sciences to the humanities and social sciences.”

Lofthus noted the relatability of Amini’s plight. “As a father of a bright and motivated 11-year-old girl, I cannot imagine a society where she is prevented from basic rights such as the freedom to dress as she wants or to pursue higher education in the subject of her choosing,” he said. “I was incredibly inspired when I first heard of what Venus, Mohamad, Salva, and others are doing and am delighted that I can help them make this fellowship a reality.”

UC Santa Barbara is believed to be the first university in North America to establish a graduate fellowship in Mahsa Amini’s name. The program aims to award the first fellowship in the 2024-25 academic year. For information, contact john.lofthus@ucsb.edu.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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