

THESIS

IT'S NOT AN OUTCOME, IT'S A STRATEGY:
STRATEGIC GENDER TARGETING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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ABSTRACT

IT'S NOT AN OUTCOME, IT'S A STRATEGY: STRATEGIC GENDER TARGETING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Why do authoritarian regimes continue to target women's rights during periods of crisis, even when moderation would appear to be the more strategically rational response? This thesis examines this puzzle through a qualitative case study of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on literature from authoritarianism, repression, and feminist political science, it identifies four explanations for strategic gender targeting: (1) gender repression as a low-cost and politically useful form of repression; (2) gender regulation as a mechanism for maintaining ideological legitimacy and social control; (3) gender hierarchies as essential to the reproduction of coercive institutions; and (4) women as high-impact mobilizers whose participation increases the effectiveness and legitimacy of mass protest movements. Using process tracing and temporal sequencing across five historical epochs, from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the Women, Life, Freedom movement, this thesis evaluates the explanatory power of each mechanism in the Iranian context.

The findings demonstrate that the Islamic Republic's targeting of women is driven primarily by the regime's reliance on gender regulation as a central pillar of ideological legitimacy and social control, with women serving as symbolic "border guards" of the revolutionary state. Strong evidence also supports the argument that women's capacity to mobilize broad, cross-cutting protest coalitions has led the regime to increasingly target women as a preemptive strategy of authoritarian survival. By contrast, the maintenance of coercive

institutions through gender hierarchies plays a secondary role, while the argument that gender repression persists because it is merely a low-cost strategy receives limited empirical support. These findings challenge assumptions that moderation is the expected authoritarian response to crisis and instead demonstrate that gendered repression can constitute a deliberate and central strategy of regime resilience.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On September 16, 2022, news broke that twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini, after being beaten and dragged into a van, had died while in the custody of the Iranian morality police (Al Jazeera 2022; United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC] 2024, 54-57). Her only crime: “improper” wearing of the hijab. Her death fanned the flames of unrest, as over a decade of grievances, economic sanctions, and human rights abuses boiled over into the streets in the form of the Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement (Moruzzi 2025, 190). Amini and the hijab served as the uniting symbol for a movement that demanded democratic accountability and the end to autocracy in the country. The sheer mass and breadth of the movement caught the security forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran completely off guard, as men and women, young and old, across various ethnic groups, joined hands to fight against the tyranny of the autocratic regime they lived under (Al Jazeera 2022; UNHRC 2024, 104). It took months of brutal, militarized crackdowns, ranging from arrests to beatings to sexual assaults to the firing of live ammunition, to quell the protests (UNHRC 2024).

Yet, even as the dust settled, the hijab, or more specifically, taking off the hijab, remained a strong symbol of resistance. While women in Iran are no strangers to pushing Iran’s mandatory hijab laws to their limits, the WLF movement transformed unveiling from a risky activist stunt to a widespread, everyday practice. Neither the international community nor the regime could deny its symbolic power—however, rather than moderating its policies on the hijab to diffuse tensions and limit the symbol’s power, the Islamic Republic doubled down on its aggressive policing of the hijab, even going so far as to introduce the death penalty for peaceful activism against compulsory veiling, equating it to a severe national security crime (Amnesty International

2024a). The dramatic increase in targeting women's rights raises a critical puzzle: Why would a country facing severe economic sanctions, regional threats, and consistent protest cycles cling so desperately to the hijab, and in turn, its repression of women?

Targeting women, even during times of crises, is a reality not limited to Iran; feminist scholars have found that crises of all forms—including economic downturns, global pandemics, armed conflict, and natural disasters—systemically lead to the rollback, subordination, and active targeting of women's rights across the globe (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020, 377; Kademaunga 2024, 71; Matfess 2025, 102). Yet why? This thesis aims to answer this very question: Why do autocratic countries or projects consistently target women's rights, even during crises where moderation would be expected? More specifically, why would Iran continue its targeting of women despite clear crises facing the country? Four distinct explanations have been identified. The first argues that regimes may continue prioritizing gender repression even during crises because it's cheap, symbolic, and politically useful relative to more overt forms of repression. The second posits that this targeting stems from the fact that gender regulation helps regimes maintain ideological legitimacy and social control. The third points to the coercive apparatus, arguing that regimes rely on gender hierarchies to sustain the social reproduction and legitimacy of coercive institutions. Finally, the fourth argues that, because women are high-impact mobilizers for social movements, regimes target women because they increase the probability that dissent becomes large-scale, legitimate, and successful.

This thesis evaluates these four explanations by examining their applicability to a single, qualitative case study of the Islamic Republic of Iran, demonstrating that these mechanisms vary in explanatory power within the Iranian context. Specifically, this thesis finds that the Iranian regime targets women primarily because gender regulation functions as a core mechanism of

ideological control and social order (Explanation 2). Through this lens, the hijab is illuminated as more than just religious attire, but as a symbolic marker of the boundaries between the regime's revolutionary ideology and the West's "cultural invasion." It also exposes the continued legal, economic, and social subordination of women as part of a dual patriarchal bargain, both between men and women, and the nation and its citizens. Additionally, it finds evidence that, because women play a uniquely powerful role in mobilizing and legitimizing mass movements (Explanation 4), the more involved women became in the country's long history of mass movements, the more aggressively the regime adapted to preemptively contain them. In contrast, while gender hierarchies do contribute to the functioning of coercive institutions (Explanation 3), this role is secondary and complementary. Additionally, the idea that gender repression is simply a low-cost strategy (Explanation 1) finds minimal support in the Iranian case.

The implications of this project are twofold. First, while feminist scholars have consistently highlighted the intrinsic link between authoritarianism and the erosion of women's rights, the link between the two has been almost completely sidelined or dismissed within the majority of the discipline. Instead, gender has been treated as a secondary result of culture or a lack of modernization, or has been analyzed only as a single measure in a "broader package of rights under attack" within large-N studies (Cavdar 2024, 2; Cavdar and Yasar 2026, 6; Inglehart and Norris 2003, cited in Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016, 170; Suteu 2025, 59). By clearly demonstrating the concrete link between the targeting of women's rights through an in-depth case study, this thesis advances the call to position gender at the center of political analysis of authoritarianism, and in turn, democracy. Secondly, it challenges the assumption in soft-rationalist frameworks that moderation is consistently the "rational response" to crises, demonstrating that gendered repression can be a rational strategy for regime survival.

The thesis will feature a qualitative research design and a positivist framework, centered around a single, holistic case study of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a representative case (Yin 2003, 40-42). It will utilize deductive logic, temporal sequencing, and process tracing to create a clear picture of the strategic causal mechanisms behind Iran's continued focus on gender. Through this, a "crisis timeline," documenting events such as the 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the 2009 Green Movement, and the Women, Life, Freedom movement, will be established and compared with the trajectory of women's rights in the country, demonstrating that repression isn't just constant, but is instead a reactive and strategic "doubling down" during crisis periods. The thesis proceeds in five chapters. Chapter Two establishes the empirical background of our single-case study, detailing Iran's crisis timeline and the institutional role of the Basij and Morality Police. Chapter Three presents the literature review, organizing existing scholarship into five primary explanations for gender targeting. Chapter Four establishes the thesis's theoretical framework by identifying which of the four explanations best accounts for the Iranian case, and outlining the specific empirical indicators that should be observed if that explanation holds true during the subsequent analysis. Chapter Five provides an analysis, utilizing process tracing and temporal sequencing to establish the Islamic Republic's central and continued reliance on gender hierarchies as the ideological glue of the regime and its primary strategy to prevent women's unique capacity for mass mobilization. Chapter Six stands as the conclusion, summarizing the findings and discussing the implications for global patterns of autocratization and authoritarianism.

Chapter 2: Empirical Background

2.1 - The Structure of Iranian Institutions

The Islamic Republic of Iran has remained remarkably durable in the face of domestic unrest, devastating economic sanctions, and external pressures as a result of a highly complex system of institutions that blends brutal repression with institutional flexibility, factionalism, and a vast network of economic patronage. The regime itself can be classified as a hybrid or competitive authoritarian state, where, rather than solely relying on a dictatorship, the state utilizes elected institutions to serve as safety valves (Kamrava 2023, 3, 7, 13-16). Through presidential, legislative, and city council elections, the regime is able to channel public frustrations, recruit new elites, and provide a semblance of domestic participation, while also maintaining elite factionalism (most relevantly, the reformists and hardliners) designed to expand its ideological appeal and prevent a single group from amassing too much political influence (266-269, 277). Additionally, the state maintains its political and economic grip through a rentier economy and expansive social welfare programs (33-34). In particular, the regime makes use of massive, state-run foundations known as *bonyads* to distribute patronage, control vast segments of the economy, and co-opt the lower classes and rural populations, entwining their economic survival with the stability of the regime (33-34, 322-337).

Despite its democratic facade, the Islamic Republic operates as a tightly sealed, closed loop of political authority, centered entirely on the Supreme Leader (*velayat-e faqih*). The country's Constitution theoretically divides power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, but the reality proves entirely different, making all three branches subordinated to the Supreme Leader and his absolute authority (Kamrava 2023, 133-135). The closed nature of the

loop can largely be attributed to the disaggregated, but tightly maintained institutional structure, which includes the Guardian Council, a twelve-member body with half being clerical members directly appointed by the Supreme Leader (3-4, 200). This body exercises what is known as “approbative supervision” or *nezarat-e estesvabi*, which grants it the absolute power to arbitrarily vet and disqualify any candidates running for the presidency, the Majlis (parliament), or the Assembly of Experts, the body directly responsible for selecting and monitoring the Supreme Leader (200-206). Yet, since this body is directly elected through the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts is packed with the Supreme Leader’s closest loyalists, resulting in a “supervising” body that functions as a mere, unquestioning rubber stamp (151-154). The influence of the Supreme Leader can even be found when legislative deadlocks between the Majles and Guardian Council occur, as the mediating body, the Expediency Council, is entirely appointed by the Supreme Leader, producing a closed loop of political authority (215-218). Backing the formal institutions is a power “deep state,” which answers exclusively to the Supreme Leader and operates outside of public accountability (4, 228). This shadow government consists of the state’s intelligence agencies, the Special Court for the Clergy (which is utilized to ruthlessly silence dissident or progressive clerics), the Friday Prayer Imams who function as the Leader’s provincial mobilization agents, and the state’s broadcasting monopoly, the IRIB, which dominates the public narrative (228). Through these appointed networks, the Supreme Leader effectively neutralizes civil society and dominates both the state’s formal and informal levers of power (138).

Yet, the ultimate guarantors of this closed loop are the system’s “praetorian guards”: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its volunteer, paramilitary wing, the Basij (Ostovar 2016, 12). The relationship between these two and the Supreme Leader is clientelistic

in nature, with Ostovar arguing it acts as a modern day *comitatus*—a Roman term for a symbiotic alliance where guards offer absolute submission and lethal protection in exchange for immense wealth, social status, and political impunity (12). As such, the foundational mandate of the IRGC is not to defend Iran’s borders (a task given to the state’s official, though less funded army, the *Artesh*), but to safeguard the Islamic Revolution and the theocratic system itself against any internal or external threats (5-6). To maintain domestic order, the IRGC and Basij exercise pervasive surveillance and severe political repression.

The Basij maintains a massive membership, embedding chapters in schools, universities, factories, and mosques across the country, operating as the regime’s grassroots enforcer and unparalleled intelligence network (5-6). It runs covert surveillance operations, such as the Ayon (eyes) and Ashraf (surveillance) units, transforming ordinary citizens into a vast army of informants meant to monitor their neighbors, coworkers, and family members (Golkar 2015, 89-92). As such, when protests threaten the regime, the specialized anti-riot units form the front lines of violently crushing dissent, utilizing specialized anti-riot units, motorcycle-riding shock troops, and martial arts “thugs” to physically terrorize and disperse demonstrators (97-102, 190). Simultaneously, the Basij serves as the frontline in the regime’s “soft war” (*jang-e narm*) against Western cultural influence, serving as extra morality police (although there’s also morality police under the regime’s official police force) to enforce strict Islamic dress codes, breaking up private parties, and dismantling satellite dishes to prevent the spread of liberalism and secularism (Golkar 2015, 84; Ostovar 2016, 188-189). In exchange for loyalty, they receive immense material and social incentives, including university admission quotas, reductions in mandatory military service, low-interest loans, and preferential hiring in the state bureaucracy (Golkar 2015,

180-185). This dynamic creates a “captive society” where economic survival and upward mobility are intrinsically tied to cooperating with the militia’s machinery of control (195).

Finally, the IRGC maintains the regime’s durability by acting as an unstoppable economic conglomerate, with its loyalty rewarded with control over a massive economic empire estimated to represent 25 to 40 percent of Iran’s entire GDP (Kamrava 2023, 184). Through entities like the Khatam al-Anbiya construction headquarters, the IRGC dominates the country’s most lucrative sectors, absorbing billions into no-bid state contracts for infrastructure, telecommunications, and oil and gas (Kamrava 2023, 183; Ostovar 2016, 6-7, 146-147). Critically, international sanctions have ironically strengthened the IRGC’s economic grip, allowing it to monopolize smuggling routes and fill the vacuum left by exiting foreign companies (Kamrava 2023, 60, 183-184). However, since the vast wealth and political influence of the IRGC is entirely dependent on the survival of the Supreme Leader, the military elite has a multi-billion dollar incentive to ensure the regime never collapses, creating an iron right loop of social, economic, and political control centered around the Supreme Leader (178-179).

2.2 - Relevant Iranian History:

The Islamic Republic of Iran was born through revolution, as millions of Iranians joined together against the dictatorial rule and corruption of Mohammad Reza Shah and the Pahlavi Dynasty. The coalition was massive and diverse, including the clergy, veiled and unveiled women, the urban middle-class, the rural population, secular liberals and nationalists, Marxists and communist leftists, Islamist-Marxists, and religious traditionalists (Abrahamian 2008, 138-139; Esfandiari 1997, 56; Ostovar 2016, 39). Yet, despite the massive coalition of revolutionaries, it was the clergy who took dominance after the 1979 Revolution. The clergy had

unmatched organizational networks and independent financial backing, from wealthy *bazaaris* charismatic leadership, and utilized strategic ambiguity to position the widely popular Ayatollah Khomeini as the undisputed leader of the revolution (Alimagham 2020, 100; Karimi 2018, 17; Mottahedeh 2008, 355-356; Ostovar 2016, 38). His ability to co-opt leftist and anti-imperialism by fusing it with traditional Shiite mythology allowed the clergy to overcome Marxist groups, capturing the loyalty of the young intelligentsia and culturally alienated urban poor (Afary 2009, 201, 244, 262). Yet, upon taking control of the government and coercive apparatus, Ayatollah Khomeini broke his promises to women and secular groups and shattered hopes of the new state being a true democracy, signified by his rejection of calls to rename the country as the “Democratic Islamic Republic,” calling it an “Islamic Republic, not a word more and not a word less” (Karimi 2018, 163).

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, on November 4, 1979, radical Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, sparking a 444-day hostage crisis, resulting in a total rupture in U.S.-Iranian relations and paving the way for the initial wave of U.S. economic sanctions on the country (Kamrava 2023, 57). Later, these sanctions would intensify, dramatically eroding the country’s economic conditions and quality of life. Yet, another crisis was on the horizon: on September 22, 1980, Saddam Hussein and Iraqi forces invaded Iran, sparking an eight-year long conflict that ultimately allowed the Ayatollah Khomeini and his regime to consolidate power, violently purge internal opposition, and heavily rely on the newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its paramilitary wing the Basij (Ostovar 2016, 61, 64-67). Following the UN ceasefire resolution, the regime executed the “Islamic Cultural Revolution,” which entailed overhauling and purging state universities, overhauling curricula, and introducing strict gender segregation and restrictions on women, all of

which resulted in substantial “brain drain” (Abrahamian 2008, 177; Afary 2009, 278; Ansary 2015, 103-104; Moghadam 2013, 177; Tazmini 2009, 32). In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini died, and his successor, then President Ali Khamenei, was officially appointed Supreme Leader, marking the beginning of the reconstruction era. Faced with a booming population and devastating economy, the state implemented family planning programs and began reopening universities and workplaces to women out of economic necessity (Alimagham 2020, 13; Moghadam 2013, 177-178).

Then, in May of 1997, Mohammad Khatami won a landslide victory in the presidential election, capturing 70% of the vote (Alimagham 2020, 43). Heavily supported by the youth and women, his platform was one of reform, citing promises to build civil society, establish the rule of law, promote a “dialogue among civilizations,” and expand political, press, and cultural freedoms (Tazmini 2009, 18). The reformist era had begun—but it was not long before efforts were thwarted by Iran’s closed loop of political authority. On July 8, 1999, massive student protests erupted at Tehran University following the closure of a reformist newspaper (108). The demonstrations were met with violence, as IRGC and hardline Basij militiamen raided dormitories, beating students and throwing some from windows (Golkar 2015, 21). This was not the last event that would signal the limits of the Khatami era. Even when reformists won a majority in the Majles and attempted to pass progressive legislation, the Guardian Council systematically vetoed reform bills and shut down dozens of reformist newspapers, leading to widespread political disillusionment (Karimi 2018, 78-79; Moghadam 2013, 181).

Then, with the election of conservative hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency, the reformist era ended. Ahmadinejad had a tenure marked by crackdowns on civil society, economic mismanagement, a confrontational foreign policy approach to Iran’s nuclear

program, and increasing militarization of the state under the IRGC (Alimagham 2020, 49-50; Moghadam 2013, 181). This era culminated in the 2009 Green Movement, where, after a highly disputed presidential election in which Ahmadinejad was swiftly declared the landslide winner, millions of Iranians flooded the streets in peaceful protest against a stolen election (Moghadam 2013, 205). While the ultimate end of the movement was violent suppression from the IRGC and Basij, where protesters were arrested, tortured, and killed, the Green Movement sparked the beginning of digital protesting and mobilization in the country, marking a particularly potent trend (Karimi 2018, 52, 83, 180-181). Yet, despite the movement's eventual suppression by security forces, it marked the largest domestic legitimacy challenge since the 1979 Revolution.

In the years since the Green Movement, the country has been marked by devastating economic sanctions and consistent cycles of protest. Following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA nuclear deal and a reinstatement of “maximum pressure” sanctions, the country faces massive inflation, a sharp decline in purchasing power, and catastrophic impacts on public health (Kamrava 2023, 57-58). While the IRGC and Basij, sustained by patronage networks and economic contracts, remained largely unscathed, the average Iranian took the brunt of the sanctions (Matfess 2025, 100-101). Women in particular struggled, bearing the brunt of job losses in the formal economy while being forced into the informal sector (100-101). 2017 through 2019 was characterized by working-class uprisings driven by the desperate economic conditions; however, unlike the Green Movement, which championed the reformists, these protests explicitly rejected both the reformists and hardliners, moving the protest towards an anti-regime tone rather than a tone of reform (Karimi 2018, 193-194). November 2019 brought the Bloody November protests, which were centered around sudden spikes in the price of fuel and were met with unprecedented lethal force and communications backouts (Golkar 2026, 1).

The culmination of this period was the Women, Life, Freedom movement, a massive protest movement sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini at the hands of the country's morality police. These demonstrations expanded nationwide and featured cross-class and cross-ethnic coalitions (Golkar 2026, 2; Moruzzi 2025, 185). This movement represented the largest anti-regime demonstrations since the 2009 Green Movement, with women and youth at the absolute forefront (Moruzzi 2025, 188-189, 225). While violently and brutally crushed by security forces, the movement represented a profound, irreversible shift in the political and cultural consciousness of the Iranian people, marking a critical point of no return (189, 226-227).

2.3 - Crisis Timelines and Epochs

The Islamic Republic of Iran is no stranger to crises—economic crises, regional armed conflict, and domestic legitimacy challenges are a defining characteristic of its past and its present. Because this thesis examines gender targeting in times of crisis, the history of the country will be divided into five distinct epochs for analytical clarity. The first of these epochs deals with the country's foundational consolidation, running from 1979 to 1989. This epoch is marked by the country's initial consolidation phase, featuring the formation of the Constitution and regime structure, and the Iran-Iraq War. Because this is the period in which the denial of women's rights was enshrined institutionally, this epoch is of particular importance for this thesis. The second epoch ranges from 1989 to 1997, and deals with the period immediately after the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. These two periods were separated due to the fact that the war forced the regime to shift its logic regarding women to aid in the aftermath of the war. Despite the launch of the "soft war" against the Western cultural invasion, the regime was forced to prioritize economic pragmatism, resulting in women experiencing a highly

paradoxical shift in their rights and social standing. Women experienced freedom from their confinement in the domestic sphere, but were subjected to a particularly aggressive enforcement of their dress and actions in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (Golkar 2015, 77; Moghadam 2013, 179).

Epoch 3 is marked by the reformist opening discussed in the previous section, ranging from 1997 to 2005. Here, under President Khatami, women's civil society and political participation exploded, resulting in feminist magazines and autonomous organizations (Ansary 2015, 145-148; Golkar 2015, 109). Furthermore, women's political coalitions grew extensively, creating alliances between secular and religious women, groups who had originally operated with deep mutual suspicion (Moghadam 2013, 201). In the legislative branch, the 2000 parliamentary elections resulted in 13 reformist women winning seats in the Sixth Majles, who eventually passed a bill to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (although it was ultimately vetoed by the Guardian Council) (Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016, 169). Furthermore, Khatami implemented nationwide municipal elections in 1999, which decentralized power and allowed citizens to elect local representatives for the first time (Tazmini 2009, 72). Women enthusiastically participated in this new political opening, with over 7,200 women running as candidates and 1,176 women being successfully elected to city and village councils (Kian 2023, 207). The reformist era also coincided with monumental demographic shifts in education, with female enrollment in universities surpassing that of men, hitting 57% of total enrollment by 2001 (Moghadam 2013, 179). Furthermore, under Khatami, textbooks were revised to include illustrations of women engaged in traditionally "male-oriented" technical and vocational tasks, while the enforcement of Islamic dress codes was somewhat relaxed (Tazmini 2009, 66).

Epoch 4 contains the collapse of the reformist era and the ushering in of both regime crackdowns and crisis escalations, and contains events from 2009 to 2017. In this epoch, political rights are curtailed, and morality enforcement was aggressively reimposed (Alimagham 2020, 49-50; Moghadam 2013, 181). As discussed in the previous section, President Ahmadinejad closed civil society and began ridged enforcement of Islamic ideals. The early peak of the epoch is the 2009 Green Movement and the resulting brutal crackdowns; however, even in the aftermath, tensions did not completely recede. Instead, various economic protests wracked the nation during this time, mimicking a pot about to boil over.

Thus, Epoch 5, which ranges from 2017 to the current day, represents the culmination of a disillusioned and strained population. Following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, economic conditions deteriorated, and major economic protests enveloped the nation from 2017 to 2019, culminating in the Bloody November protests. Yet, the true culmination of this trend was the Women, Life, Freedom movement, which not only represented a major domestic legitimacy challenge, but was the first time in Iranian history that women and feminist demands were not only symbolic of the movement but central to it (Moruzzi 2025, 189). As this thesis will later argue, this culmination represents a major turning point in Iranian history, where domestic calls for democracy expanded to both men and women's rights to "full participatory citizenship and membership in a shared national polity" (198, 225-226).

Chapter 3: Literature Review - The Four Explanations for Gender Targeting

3.0 - Conceptual Framework, Definitions, and Scope

This thesis identifies and prepares four explanations as to why a regime may prioritize targeting women, even amid crisis periods where the logic of soft rationality would predict moderation. The first of these explanations argues that regimes may continue prioritizing gender repression even during crises because it's cheap, symbolic, and politically useful relative to more overt forms of repression. The second points to the fact that gender regulation helps regimes maintain ideological legitimacy and social control, defining the boundaries of citizenship and justifying both inequality and autocratic involvement outside of the classic political sphere. The third explanation asserts that regimes may rely on gender hierarchies to sustain the social reproduction and legitimacy of coercive institutions. Finally, the fourth explanation demonstrates that women are high-impact mobilizers for social movements, providing them with legitimacy, numbers, and bridging capacity. As such, regimes target women because they increase the probability that dissent becomes large-scale, legitimate, and successful—especially during crisis periods.

Yet, essential to these explanations are the scope, conceptual frameworks, and definitions that support these very explanations. First, it's necessary to assert the scope to which these explanations are intended to apply: autocratic regimes or regimes undergoing autocratization. This thesis conceptualizes democracy through a 'liberal' framework, as utilized by contemporary indices like *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) and popularized by Diamond (1996). As such, a liberal democracy is one with: no “reserved domains” of power or unaccountable actors,

horizontal accountability, uncertain electoral outcomes, extensive civil liberties and pluralism, minority protections, and a robust rule of law (Diamond 1996, 23-24). This definition is particularly vital given this thesis's focus on gender inequality as a defining characteristic of autocratization and authoritarianism. If gender equality is largely incompatible with authoritarianism, and women's rights are a fundamental precondition for the establishment of democracy (Chenoweth and Marks 2022, 105), the regular observance of attacks on gender equality during crisis periods is revealed not as an irrational byproduct of instability, but as a standardized strategic response to threats against authoritarian consolidation. Furthermore, this thesis also defines autocratization as any move away from democracy in either democratic or autocratic regimes (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1098-1099). In combination, these two highlight a critical dynamic: as regimes decouple themselves from democratic constraints, they increasingly utilize the regulation of women's rights as a tool for authoritarian resilience. Finally, it's critical to establish that this thesis operates on a concept of soft rationalism, which argues that regimes constantly weigh the benefits of repression against the costs of repression, including the possibility of repression backfiring and creating a larger pool of domestic dissent or international outcry (Davenport 2007, 3-4). This cost-benefit calculus is critical because it mandates that scholars consider that regimes are strategic about when, where, and what type of repression they utilize in order to maximize the benefits of said strategy, explaining why we might see a simultaneous restriction of rights and an apparent "expansion" of non-transformational reforms, creating a non-linear pattern of gender restrictions and "expansions" (Çavdar 2024, 2). The following sections outline these explanations as they exist in the literature; their application to the Iranian case is developed in Chapter 4.

3.1 - Repression, Crisis, and the “Punishment Puzzle”

As autocratization has increasingly become an area of scholarly interest following a so-called “third wave of autocratization,” and an increasing trend of countries with net declines in their aggregate democracy scores outnumbering those with net increases, scholars have slowly begun turning their focus towards the link between these autocratic patterns and gendered repression (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018). As such, a growing body of evidence linking the two has emerged over the last decade. Chenoweth and Marks (2022) find that this global resurgence of authoritarianism coincides directly with an assault on women’s rights, arguing that “misogyny and authoritarianism are...mutually reinforcing ills,” while Roggeband and Krizsán (2024) assert that opposition to gender equality is a “...constituent parts of the current wave of autocratization” (103; 397). In a similar vein, Suteu (2025) argues that democratic backsliding and crises of the rule of law are inherently gendered phenomena, with Brechenmacher, Jones, and Zihnioğlu (2024a) signaling a similar stance by highlighting how democratic backsliding has been closely intertwined with attacks on women’s rights and the promotion of traditional gender hierarchies. With increasingly more scholars encountering a robust correlation between gender, autocratization, and authoritarian patterns, there remains no doubt that many authoritarian regimes or projects utilize some form of gender oppression to entrench political power.

Yet, no regime is exempt from crisis. Economic sanctions and downturns, legitimacy challenges, and regional or ethnic conflicts are some of the hallmarks of crisis conditions, and no regime is eternally insulated from any one of them. While the manifestations of crisis can vary widely, ranging from forcing the regime to engage in a conflict with a neighboring state to having to endure heavy economic sanctions, one of the most threatening responses to crisis

conditions are domestic mass movements, which can erupt if citizens perceive conditions to become critical enough to overcome the cost of participating in collective action. Under the framework of soft rationalism, regimes and elites strategically weigh the escalating costs of coercion against the stabilizing benefits of moderation (Davenport 2007, 3-4). When a crisis threatens the stability and longevity of a regime, the literature identifies three primary strategic “brakes” that should, theoretically, veer a regime away from high-intensity repression and towards moderation. The first deterrent takes the form of the risk of backlash in the face of repression. Davenport (2007), under the framework of soft rationalism, highlights the Law of Coercive Responsiveness, stating that this stable finding asserts that political authorities consistently respond with repressive action when faced with challenges to the regime (7-8). However, this dynamic, when paired with the unpredictability of repression outcomes, creates a so-called “punishment puzzle,” where often, when regimes rely on coercion, it frequently backfires by exacerbating and escalating the dissent it was intended to quell (7-8). Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) expand on this by arguing that the potential for backfire can dramatically increase when a regime aims to repress an organized, nonviolent resistance movement (11-12). Under these circumstances, violence against unarmed civilians can reap mass domestic outrage, along with additional international condemnation, which may result in further economic isolation and in turn, increased domestic movements (11-13). Stephan and Chenoweth even highlight the potential for regime security forces to defect in the case of repression against nonviolent movements, adding an additional layer of risk for regimes. In cases where backlash seems likely or unavoidable, it becomes rational for regimes to moderate their use of physical violence and other forms of repression in an attempt to avoid counterproductive escalation (11-13).

The second revolves around Gerschewski's (2013) argument that autocratic regimes cannot survive purely on repression and elite co-optation, but must also maintain "legitimation" to neutralize threats from the population (18). He divides legitimation into "diffuse" support (ideological, religious, or nationalist beliefs) and "specific support" (support for performance-based outputs), and argues that when an autocracy's ideological footing fails during a crisis, the regime must resort to specific support—meaning that it must deliver socio-economic performance, concessions, and public order to survive (19, 28-29). In essence, because high-intensity repression is incompatible with performance-based legitimation due to the punishment problem, the rational move is for a regime to moderate towards what Gerschewski calls a "de-politicization configuration," where a regime focuses on low-intensity, subtle repression to survive the crisis, prevent escalation, and placate the public (19-20, 29-30). The third set of "breaks" builds on Gerschewski, but revolves around co-optation, which he conceptualizes as strategies centered around neutralizing the threat of intra-elite splits by ensuring strategic insiders are rewarded for loyalty (22). Now, while co-optation is often executed through both formal routes like legislatures and political parties and informal routes like patronage and clientelism, this deterrent deals with the latter, as defections are likely to arise once the rents have dried up (22). In specific, Harrijvan and Weerdesteijn (2022) highlight that for regimes that rely heavily on "productive economic activity" (such as labor-intensive agriculture or industry) rather than "free resources" (such as oil or foreign aid), the dictator is entirely dependent on the cooperation and labor of the masses to generate government wealth (319). Certainly, this configuration means that the regime must concede to the masses simply to continue generating revenue, but it also means these concessions are necessary to maintain co-optation of the regime elites and loyalists whose allegiance depends on rents, providing a

unique incentive to moderate repression and enter a de-politicization configuration. It is worth noting, however, that states that rely largely on free resources, often rentier states, can be insulated from these pressures, which may lead to increased repression due to a reduced need to rely on citizen cooperation for revenue generation (319). Regardless, Stephan and Chenoweth highlight an additional level of co-optation that must be accounted for: the security apparatus. In many autocratic regimes, the coercive apparatus is maintained through patronage and clientelism, which makes its maintenance similar to that of regime elites; however, there's an additional level that presents itself when security forces are faced with an explicitly nonviolent movement. Under these circumstances, because nonviolent protesters do not physically threaten the lives of security forces, said forces are more likely to shift their loyalties away from the regime, rather than execute brutal orders against their fellow citizens (13-14). Thus, if a dictator or ruling party senses that a violent crackdown or repression might prompt a mutiny, it's highly rational to moderate their responses to prevent the collapse of their most vital pillars of support. In short, under a soft rationalism framework, one would expect the rational response to a crisis situation where domestic unrest created mobilized movements or threatened the rents of a regime's loyalists, that said regime would moderate its policies and provide strategic concessions to ease the threat and lower the likelihood of having to risk the punishment puzzle.

However, despite the logic behind moderation, reality seems to play out quite differently, particularly at the intersection of gender. Many regimes, despite experiencing crises, have instead doubled down on repression, with gender repression being particularly well documented. One might become baffled at this contradiction—after all, implementing repressive policies or outright violence against roughly half of a state's population seems counterproductive when moderation is the expectation. However, numerous countries and regimes have exploited periods

of crisis to initiate, escalate, or justify the severe repression of women. Take for example Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, and Sudan, all of which utilized armed conflict, war, and the immediate aftermath to institute or expand gendered repression in the name of restoring order (Enloe 2000; Moghadam 1994; Moghadam 2013, 156-160; Tripp 2019). Critically, the phenomenon is not restricted to the MENA region, as case studies from Latin America, the U.S., and Europe have emerged reporting patterns of gender targeting during crises. In Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary and Poland, democratically backsliding regimes have utilized perceived demographic and migration crises to drastically roll back gender equality (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019; Matfess 2025, 32; Szczypińska 2019), while in Argentina, right-wing populist president Javier Milei responded to economic crises by shuttering the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, and terminating a vital subsidy program that helped victims of gender violence escape abusive situations (Matfess 2025, 81-82). Thus, if the targeting and erosion of women's rights during crises appears to be a global trend, one must question what drives regimes to do so. The existing literature provides four answers.

It is crucial to note, however, that gendered repression can be a non-linear process, involving simultaneous non-transformative advances in gender equality while maintaining or increasing meaningful rollbacks in gender equality. Roggeband and Krizsán (2024) assert that autocracies often adopt “low risk, high gain” reforms like electoral quotas or employment rights in order to project a modern image to the international community and secure foreign aid—all while actively mitigating the risk of disrupting the patriarchal status quo through descriptive, rather than substantive reforms (408). Tripp (2019) arrives at a similar conclusion, adding that the adoption of women's rights or legal reforms serves the highly instrumental purpose of projecting a modernized image to the world, allowing the regime to maintain technical

compliance with international treaties and attract donor funding (60-62, 64, 279). Underneath the outward projection of gender equality often lies gendered repression, such as limiting women's bodily autonomy, curtailing sexual and reproductive rights, condoning gender-based violence, and persecuting independent feminist scholars and activists (Roggeband and Krizsán 2024, 401-403). Sometimes, these advances in women's rights are smokescreens designed to hide human rights violations or divert attention away from other undemocratic goals or movements by the regime (Tripp 2019, 279). Alternatively, gender reforms may be designed to manage extreme domestic factions or funnel women's political participation into officially sanctioned organizations to prevent autonomous feminist organizations (Thames 2017, 11-13; Tripp 2019, 43-45). This process is known as "gender-washing," and will be expanded upon in Explanation 1, gender as low-cost repression.

This dynamic can be seen throughout the globe; take for example Morocco and Turkey. In Morocco, the push for women's rights, such as the 2004 Moudawana Family Code Reforms, functioned largely as a political strategy designed to neutralize extremist Salafi tendencies, co-opt female militants into the state apparatus, and present Morocco as a modernizing nation to the West (Thames 2017, 11; Tripp 2019, 42-45). Thus, while the country's Family Laws were reformed and Constitutional provisions were made, the victories were top-down in nature, doing little to address the on the ground realities for women in "deep Morocco" (El Guabli 2018, 227-228). The state's Constitutional reforms failed to address structural exclusion, illiteracy, domestic violence, and poverty for women (228, 233). The regime also often manipulates the language of women's rights to bolster its image while delaying transformative democratization and implementation, leaving women vulnerable to the state's justice system (232-233). In Turkey, Roggeband and Krizsán (2024) highlight that the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

under President Erdoğan sponsors conservative women's organizations, such as the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) in order to legitimize the government's policy objectives by promoting a conservative, essentialist, "gender justice" model designed to co-opt the sphere of women's organizations and prevent independent groups from meaningful participation (399). Brechenmacher, Carothers, and Zihnioğlu (2024) note that, while the AKP initially leveraged liberal discourse on gender equality and advanced women's rights to soften fears of the party's Islamist roots and bolster its legitimacy with secular elites, the party quickly centralized power and became increasingly authoritarian (39-40). As a direct result, feminists' political influence waned, and the government began lashing out against progressive gender norms and withdrawing from women's rights treaties like the Istanbul Convention (sometimes called "gender-bashing") (39-40, 398). Additionally, Çavdar and Yaşar (2026) highlight how, in 2004, the Turkish parliament actually passed progressive amendments to the Constitution and Penal Code; however, the ruling government neither initiated nor supported the changes, only agreeing to them due to domestic pressure (8-9). Instead, the regime deliberately dragged its feet to prevent initiating the reforms, attempted to sabotage them, and ultimately resisted the laws and changes through deliberate non-implementation (8-9). In both cases, surface-level gender reforms seem to signal a turn for the better, but the realities for women in both contexts remain under-addressed or actively attacked (8-9). This non-linear reality is critical to establish, as it forces scholars to examine gender equality as a complex autocratic strategy, often involving simultaneous advances and erosions. Without this consideration, a country could be seen as making democratic progress when in reality, the change is either superficial or accompanied by delays or other rollbacks of women's rights.

3.2 - Explanation 1: Gender Repression Cheap, Symbolic, and Politically Useful

The first of the four explanations argues that regimes may continue prioritizing gender repression even during crises because it's a cheap and symbolic signal of autocratic strength relative to more overt forms of repression or democratic erosion. This explanation does not focus specifically on gender as a symbolic or ideological category, but instead treats gender targeting as part of a broader strategy of low-cost repression. Authoritarian regimes and autocratic projects are, at their core, anxious about potential threats to the status quo or their authority. If one refers to the Law of Coercive Responsiveness, coined by Davenport (2007), regimes are certain to meet any sort of threat to the status quo with some form of repression, as “quiescence,” a state of peace and order, is incredibly beneficial to political authorities (7-9). The quiet obedience characteristic of quiescence allows for leaders to perform vital functions such as extracting taxes and maintaining legitimacy, and as such, any sort of threat—be it a protest, strike, or even everyday resistance—becomes a threat to both the regime's image and wallet. However, inherent in the Law of Coercive Responsiveness is the “Punishment Puzzle”: the fact that, while regimes will almost always repress in the face of a threat, the results of said repression, particularly if it is violent, are rather unpredictable (8). As Gerschewski (2013) asserts, the relationship between legitimation and repression is the “Achilles heel” of an autocracy (28). High-intensity, hard repression can function as a double-edged sword, bringing the potential of unintended consequences that trigger a destabilizing downward legitimacy spiral for a regime. The potential for backlash is particularly pronounced if a regime is confronting an explicitly nonviolent domestic movement. When a violent crackdown on an unarmed, nonviolent group is perceived as particularly unjust, the cost of that repression, according to Stephan and Chenoweth (2008), becomes extraordinarily high and can backfire against the regime in three major ways (11-14).

First, it can result in increased public mobilization and moral outrage; when the public perceives nonviolent campaigns as physically nonthreatening, violent regime countermeasures appear fundamentally unjust and extreme, leading to moral outrage that mobilizes larger segments of the population to join the movement, further increasing the threat the movement poses to the regime (11). della Porta (2013) echoes this sentiment, arguing that while repression raises the costs of protesting, if repression is non-discriminatory, hitting bystanders and moderate activists, it antagonizes inactive sympathizers and intensifies the moral outrage of the population (38-39, 57-61). Even in cases where repression is not indiscriminate, high-intensity repression creates martyrs and rallies troops to the movement's cause, forcing bystanders to choose sides, which can unintentionally increase the movement's reach (Lichbach 1998, 63). Second, high-intensity repression of nonviolent movements frequently causes loyalty shifts within the state's coercive apparatus. Because members of a nonviolent movement do not immediately threaten the lives or well-being of members of the regime, members of the military, police, and civil service are significantly more likely to disobey orders or defect when commanded to violently attack unarmed protesters, compared to if they were fighting armed insurgents (13-14). Third and finally, violent crackdowns on nonviolent movements are likely to draw the attention of international media, foreign governments, and human rights organizations, frequently resulting in international sanctions and the withdrawal of foreign support (12). For autocratic regimes dependent on foreign support or trade, this withdrawal can damage the economy, leading to further civilian outrage and potentially drawing in bystanders due to increased economic grievances.

As a result of the high and unpredictable consequences of high-intensity repression, it is rational for a regime to look for alternative, lower-cost tools of repression—particularly those

that are technically nonviolent. Low-intensity repression can take a myriad of forms, including items like surveillance, routine physical harassment, the denial of jobs or educational opportunities, and the curtailment of political rights (Gerschewski 2013, 21; Levitsky and Way 2010, 58). The ultimate goal of low-intensity repression is to prevent large-scale social movements or discourage participation in them to the point that they either dissolve or become a trivial threat to the regime. A cornerstone of this form of repression is the combination of degrading the public sphere and shrinking civil society. For example, rather than shutting down newspapers with police raids, contemporary autocrats utilize “behind-the-scenes” censorship and financial coercion to control the press (Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017, 166-167; Scheppele 2018, 577n112). Regimes may opt to starve critical outlets of government funding, pressure regime-friendly oligarchs to buy out independent media companies, or place broadcasting networks under the strict control of the regime or political allies (Huq and Ginsburg 2017, 47-48; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 84-85; Scheppele 2018, 578). Levitsky and Way outline two prominent examples:

In Russia, after Vladimir Gusinsky's independent NTV television network earned a reputation as a "pain in the neck," the Putin government unleashed the tax authorities on Gusinsky, arresting him for "financial misappropriation." Gusinsky was offered "a deal straight out of a bad Mafia movie: give up NTV in exchange for freedom." He took the deal, turned NTV over to the giant government-controlled energy company, Gazprom, and fled the country. In Venezuela, the Chavez government launched an investigation into financial irregularities committed by Globovision television owner Guillermo Zuloaga, forcing him to flee the country to avoid arrest. Under intense financial pressure, Zuloaga eventually sold Globovision to a government-friendly businessman. As key media outlets are assaulted, others grow wary and begin to practice self-censorship. (2010, 84)

In addition to attacks on the press, regimes will frequently crack down on civil society by shrinking the civic space required for autonomous organizing. They may target non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with severe legal constraints, restrictive funding laws,

and disproportionate, months-long auditioning procedures designed to paralyze their daily operations (Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 403; Roggeband and Krizán 2019, 206; Szczygielska 2019, 132). They may also actively create government-operated NGOs (GONGOs) to crowd out the authentic civil society and artificially project public consensus (Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 403). Critically, the “redirection” of civil society towards government-friendly or sponsored GONGOs serves a secondary purpose: allowing the regime to maintain a “veneer of democracy”. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) assert that modern authoritarian regimes maintain hollowed versions of democratic institutions to project a democratic image for international legitimacy and co-opt domestic opposition by leading them to believe that legislatures and other civil society organizations are legitimate avenues to address grievances (Gandhi 2009, 77–81). By keeping the opposition in a controlled environment, such as a legislature or GONGO, regimes are able to ensure that contestation and civic participation remain on their terms, while effectively deterring mass organization through fear, fatigue, and self-censorship. In short, the goal of low-intensity repression is to produce a “chilling effect” (Levitsky and Way 2010), and by maintaining a relentless drumbeat of subtle harassment, bureaucratic obstruction, and financial pressure, the regime seeks to fatigue the opposition into compliance without the potentially devastating blowbacks of high-intensity repression (366-367).

Why Women?

Critical to the arguments of this thesis, the closure of civic spaces and the usage of low-intensity repression is a selective mechanism affecting most prominently those organizations or groups identified as critical, or even an enemy of the state, making organizations working with gender and sexual rights a prominent target (Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 403). Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen (2020) make the compelling argument that the roots of autocracy are embedded in

the “Patrilineal/Fraternat Syndrome,” a system of male-bonded kin networks that rely entirely on the structural subordination of women (2-3, 127). They argue that the “first political order” of any society is the sexual political order established within the household, and that the way men and women relate in the home serves as a template for the broader political order of the state (12-14, 119). When a society normalizes the subordination, coercion, and exploitation of women at the household level, these dynamics organically expand outward, reproducing themselves as the institutions, governance styles, and economies of their respective nations. They note that, when women gain property rights, the right to divorce, and freedom from violence, “a tipping point has been reached: patrilineal governance cannot be perpetuated where women enjoy this status” (326-328). As such, under this framework, female empowerment and equality become an existential threat to the domestic male hierarchies that form the foundation of autocratic power dynamics. Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen are far from isolated in their position, with Moghadam (2013) noting that in neopatriarchal states, the control of women is considered absolutely central to the reproduction and stability of the authoritarian state, community, and extended family (118-119). Similarly, she firmly argues that because the patriarchal family serves as a foundational model for the state, and as such, efforts to introduce gender equality threaten the entire structure of contemporary property rights, patriarchal relations, and state authority—hence the fierce resistance and patriarchal backlash. Importantly, Moghadam takes a staunchly anti-Islamic Exceptionalism stance, explicitly rejecting culturalist explanations of gender targeting in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and arguing that women’s lives and subordination are primarily driven by macro-level, structural factors as opposed to Islam or inherent cultural “backwardness” (x). Roggeband and Krizsán (2024) provide additional testimony of the threat of women’s equality to autocratic regimes, asserting that these regimes

rely heavily on maintaining traditional patriarchal hierarchies to reproduce the status quo and secure their rule, making the collective organization of women and the fight for bodily autonomy particularly dangerous. They argue that by promoting state projects that enforce heteronormative family models, autocrats are able to restrict women to traditional roles, deliberately rolling back their claims to public power and allowing for regimes to reproduce the status quo of unequal power relations (401).

Yet, outside of producing and sustaining the unequal power dynamics of autocratic regimes, there's an additional incentive for autocrats to make women a focus of low-intensity repression: there are generally lower social costs to this targeting. As a result of contemporary autocratic regimes adopting a veneer of democracy, direct and visible attacks on institutions like elections carry a particularly high social cost because they have widely become associated with political legitimacy and recognition (Carothers 1997, 22; Donno 2013, 1, 33-34). Due to their strong link to modern legitimacy, the existence of these institutions is generally “out of the realm of debate”—autocrats cannot argue that these institutions are unimportant without significant pushback. Unfortunately, gender equality and women's rights do not share that same status, and are still largely “up for debate,” and if the world is still publicly questioning if women deserve a seat at the table, rolling back those rights is already a “feasible” part of the debate. While significant progress has been made in recent decades, discrimination and violence against women remain largely normalized from a young age, and the contestation of women's rights is present at all levels, including internationally, domestically, and even within the home (Matfess 2025, 9, 162–169). It is normalized through several overlapping social, economic, and political processes that make inequality appear “natural” rather than political, lowering the costs associated with even outright dismantlement (Krook 2017, 97-99). In addition to violence and

discrimination lowering the social costs of rolling back women's rights, some women may also face an uphill battle in proving that their rights are under attack at all. Roggeband and Krizán (2024) highlight that some regimes engage with women's rights through a dual pathway: "gender-washing" and "gender-bashing" (398-404). Regimes may engage in gender-washing by adopting reforms like gender quotas to signal modernity to the international community and to secure foreign support, while also engaging in gender-bashing by attacking reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and "gender ideology" to mobilize conservative domestic bases. This dual pathway provides the regime with plausible deniability when engaging with women's rights activists, maintaining a facade of gender equality while simultaneously hollowing out any transformative gender progress. Even internationally, women's rights remain politically insecure. While IGOs like the UN have attempted to engage with women's rights through the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, states often adopt the agenda shallowly, prioritizing the protection of women from sexual violence rather than attempting to address the systemic gender inequalities inherent within war and gender hierarchies. (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 72, 113). This "pick-and-choose" adoption creates a hierarchy where women's rights are only addressed when they do not impinge on the established patriarchal foundations of the international and state systems (202, 218). Taken together, these dynamics render women's rights a uniquely permissive arena for early autocratic intervention—one in which rollback is politically feasible, socially legible, and institutionally weakly constrained.

Collectively, the low-cost repression explanation asserts that regimes target women's rights and organizations because they are both critical targets and relatively "cheap" targets. The maintenance of gender hierarchies through low-intensity repression allows a regime to systematically uphold the patriarchal structures sustaining the regime, while also presenting

strength and a willingness to crack down on broader civil society. This both discourages general social movements through the chilling effect, and maintains the quiescence autocracies crave—all without the major social and legitimacy backlash associated with the dismantling of more visible and less debated institutions. This dynamic becomes particularly potent during crisis periods, where social tensions are at their highest and mobilization becomes increasingly more likely. Under these conditions, showcasing regime strength and will while focusing on mitigating pushback is critical, highlighting why low-intensity gender repression often continues even in the face of crisis. For regimes, diverting resources to maintaining this repression is often more than worth it.

3.3 - Explanation 2: Ideological Legitimacy, Social Control, and Women as Symbols

Women as Symbols of the Nation

In the construction of national identity, the state rarely views its citizens as a monolithic mass; instead, it frequently positions women as the primary symbolic and physical vessels of cultural and ideological identity. This creates a unique opportunity for political control: by regulating women, regimes can visibly define and enforce the ideological and physical boundaries of the state, while justifying autocratic intervention as protectionist and natural. As such, the gender as ideological control explanation argues that gender regulation helps regimes maintain ideological legitimacy and social control, making it especially critical in times of crisis. In her book “Gender & Nation,” Yuval-Davis (1997) introduces a foundational framework for the topic, arguing that women are frequently and intentionally assigned the critical role of “bearers of the collective,” and consequently, a nation’s political and demographic survival is deeply tied to the control of women’s actions and reproductive capacities (26). On a biological

level, she argues that nationalist projects control women's reproduction based on national interest, often tying it to one of three forms of discourse. The first deals with projects where the future and survival of the nation depend on continuous population growth, resulting in women being heavily pressured to bear children in order to provide the nation with manpower, soldiers, and strength (29-30). Abdo (1994) affirms this logic, stating that within the ideology of nationalism, women are fundamentally identified as the "maintainers and reproducers of 'national soldiers, national heroes and manpower'" (150). The second leans heavily into eugenics discourse, where reproduction is framed around the "quality of national stock," or the nation's genetic pool, and the state encourages reproduction of "suitable" women while actively discouraging or preventing marginalized, minority, or disabled women from having children (Yuval-Davis 1997, 22). The third centers on a sort of Malthusian discourse, where a lack of resources or rapid population growth becomes threatening to the state, and policies are implemented to strictly limit women's reproduction (22, 33-35).

Outside of biological reproduction, and arguably more critical to the purpose of this thesis, is the assigned role of symbolic and cultural reproducers. Yuval-Davis (1997) demonstrates that women are entrusted with maintaining the "essence" of the culture, stating that, "The construction of 'home' is of particular importance here, including relations between adults and between adults and children in the family, ways of cooking and eating, domestic labour, play and bedtime stories, out of which a whole world view, ethical and aesthetic, can become naturalized and reproduced" (43). Similar sentiments can be seen through Enloe (2014) who notes that immense ideological weight is placed on women because they are viewed as the "principal vehicles for transmitting the whole nation's values from one generation to the next" (108). She observes that women are frequently treated as "patriarchically sculpted symbols," that

serve as “symbols of the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, [and] the nation at its purest” (87). Yuval-Davis (1997) highlights this dynamic by conceptualizing women as “symbolic border guards” who maintain the mythical dividing lines between the regime’s concepts of “us” and “them,” implying that control over women’s behavior is functionally equivalent to control over the boundaries of the nation itself (23). Moghadam (1994) notes that “women frequently become the sign or marker of political goals and of cultural identity during processes of revolution and state-building,” highlighting that how a movement or regime treats debates around women signifies the broader political and cultural projects of that movement (2). For instance, for some movements in the early 20th century, progress and civilization were often equated with women’s “emancipation,” with unveiled, educated women being promoted as a symbol of modernity (Moghadam 1994, 2-3; Moghadam 2013, 41). In other cases, movements emphasizing cultural revival or religious orthodoxy see veiled women as a symbol of authenticity and resistance against Western cultural imperialism (Moghadam 1994, 2-4). Furthermore, this dynamic exists outside of revolutionary or nationalist contexts, with Kimmel (2013) arguing that extreme right-wing and white supremacist movements utilize the idealized mother of traditional patriarchal family structures as a symbol of racial purity and Christian goodness, stating that “She is the symbolic nation itself,” whom men are sworn to protect (chap. 7).

This creates a dynamic interaction where women are positioned as vulnerable symbols of the nation’s purity, honor, and future, and in turn, the nation itself is simultaneously personified as a vulnerable female body that requires active defense against violation (Kian 2023, 29-30; Yuval-Davis 1997, 45-46). As a result, the physical and moral boundaries of the nation are directly mapped onto women’s bodies, transforming the defense of national sovereignty into a

gendered imperative of masculine protection (Kian 2023, 30). This framing of women, and by extension, the entire nation, relies heavily on the logic of masculinist protection, a patriarchal dynamic where the “good” man or state takes on the duty of shielding vulnerable dependents (women and children) from the unpredictable threats of “bad” men or outsiders (Young 2003, 4-5). Consequently, by dividing the world into “Just Warriors” and “Beautiful Souls” who remain innocent and protected, the regime can mimic this dynamic, positioning itself as the ultimate masculine protectors (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 167-168). This protector stance provides authoritarian states with a powerful justification for sweeping involvement in both the public and private spheres, effectively expanding the dynamics of subordination in the home to the entire population, with the regime as the fatherly protector and citizens as subordinate women (Young 2003, 9). However, this interaction paradoxically strips women of their political agency and subjects them to severe patriarchal control. Bearing the burden of cultural reproduction, the boundaries of a collective are actively marked by the “proper” behavior of women, including concepts of modesty, honor, and women’s clothing (Enloe 2014, 108; Yuval-Davis 1997, 45-46, 67). Consequently, any cultural breach of conduct by women is viewed not as a personal failing, but as a betrayal of culture that brings “shame” and dishonor upon the entire nation or community (Yuval-Davis 1997, 45-46). As such, this dynamic illuminates debates over women’s emancipation, veiling, unveiling, and access to public spaces as battlegrounds over cultural boundaries and ideology rather than simple arguments over “proper” gender roles.

The Patriarchal Bargain

Critically, to enforce women’s role as “proper” cultural reproducers, the regime does not rely solely on top-down enforcement mechanisms, but instead simultaneously delegates the role

of enforcement to the country's men in a patriarchal bargain. The patriarchal bargain, at its core, ensures that men collectively receive the "patriarchal dividend," a massive, systematic transfer of wealth, power, and labor from women to men (Connell 2005, 82-84). In particular, men secure four distinct benefits, the first being a continuous, unpaid supply of domestic, emotional, and reproductive labor from women and offering only basic maintenance in return (Walby 1989, 221). The second is Pateman's "male sex-right," which guarantees him sexual access to women's bodies (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020, 17-18). The third entices men with the psychological and social status of the chivalrous "masculine protector," where, as the head of the household, he shields his dependents from outside threats in exchange for women's decision-making autonomy, gratitude, adoration, and unquestioning loyalty (Young 2003, 4-5). This dynamic transforms an unequal, exploitative relationship into a sentimental tale of mutual obligation, allowing men to feel morally superior rather than oppressive (4-5). Fourth, by confining women to the private sphere, men free themselves to monopolize the public sphere, giving them access to the formal labor market, the ability to build political alliances, and the right to accumulate wealth (Hughes and Paxton 2014, 105). This monopoly allows men to dominate the very machinery, wealth, and weapons that govern the modern world, providing an enticing incentive to strictly regulate women to the home—for both personal gain and cultural preservation. Critical to the bargain is that, by allowing men complete access to dominate the public sphere and its resources, men engineer a society where women are forced to strategically participate in their own subordination to survive. As a result of their economic and legal subordination, often institutionalized through family laws and penal codes, women must attach themselves to an individual man to secure physical, social, and economic protection—for those who don't are often abandoned by society (Jackman 1994, 82-83). Importantly, to avoid the high costs and resistance associated with

explicit violence to enforce the subjugation of women, men utilize benevolent paternalism: an ideological framework and method of social control in which men maintain their power by adopting a stance of loving, fatherly care (9-11). This strategy relies heavily on language of affection and mutual obligation, designed to mask men's monopoly over resources and labor while claiming superior moral competence, similar to a father-child dynamic (12-14). This grants men the self-given authority to define what their subordinates' "needs" are, and therefore, provide for these manufactured needs while transforming an unequal relationship into a comforting narrative of complementary duties and mutual obligation (14-15).

In addition to entering a patriarchal enforcement contract with the country's men, the state will often invoke a feminine anthropomorphization of the nation to enter into a patriarchal bargain with the nation as a whole, women *and men* (Fallon 2010, 48-50; Kian 2023, 29-30). In this way, it mirrors the subjugation of women at home with the broader population, relying on the naturalization of male authority and inequality at the family level to naturalize autocratic authority at the national level. When the private sphere functions as the base unit of society, and when women are kept subjugated in the home, the regime establishes a "school of despotism" where hierarchical, authoritarian relations are normalized from birth, ensuring that citizens are psychologically primed to accept obedience in the broader political realm (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020, 119; Wilde 2018, 99-100). Utilizing this normalization and the same logic of masculinist protection, the state exchanges protection for absolute obedience, while parading as a paternalistic figure protecting a vulnerable public from outside threats to both their physical safety and their cultural purity (Young 2003, 4-5). The same paternal benevolence practiced at the family level is then utilized by the state to portray autocratic overreach as necessary, living

measures to ensure the safety of the nation from external enemies or moral decay (1-9). As Young asserts,

Public leaders invoke fear, then they promise to keep those living under them safe. Because we are afraid, and our fears are stirred by what we see on television or read in the newspaper, we are grateful to the leaders and officers who say that they will shoulder the risk in order to protect us. The logic of masculinist protection works to elevate the protector to a position of superior authority and to demote the rest of us to a position of grateful dependency. (13)

As a result of female subjugation being the foundation for the justification and legitimacy of autocratic control, gender equality and its initiatives present a direct threat to the regime's stability. This then illuminates a regime's attacks on gender equality and enforcement of heteropatriarchal structures, not as ideological choices or secondary effects of autocracy, but as strategic and vital maintenance of autocratic structures. To compound, macro-level crises, such as economic crises or neoliberal structural adjustments, can put the relationship between the state and its people to the test. Part of the patriarchal bargain is protection and maternal provision (even if the boundaries of that are determined by the state rather than actual need), and if the state fails to provide, the contract becomes endangered (Kandiyoti 1988, 281-284). Critically, when the patriarchal contract fails, the myth of male protectionism is exposed, and if the state is unable to provide a social safety net, resulting in a trickle-down of men failing to fulfill their patriarchal bargain with women, the results can be catastrophic for autocratic regimes (282). Rather than automatic gender emancipation, the failure triggers a profound crisis of identity, intense household conflicts, and severe societal destabilization. Under the patriarchal dividend, a man's social value and authority are linked to his ability to provide, and when stripped of this role, they experience a profound masculinity crisis defined by feelings of emasculation, aggrieved entitlement, and destructive compensational behaviors directed internally or externally towards vulnerable groups to establish feelings of dominance (Cornwall et al. 2011, 206;

Kimmel 2013, chapt. 3; Silberschmidt 2011, 100-104). In societies where marriage necessitates a dowry or brideprice, economic crises can diminish young men's access to the marriage market, often resulting in these men turning to violent crime, rebel militias, or terrorist groups to forcibly extract the resources a broken contract denies them (Hudson and Matfess 2017). Additionally, women are far from passive actors in these situations. Within the family unit, when men are unable to provide, women are forced to absorb the shock through highly exploitative, low-wage jobs in the informal sector, breeding intense mistrust and disrespect towards their husbands or guardians, further fueling aggrieved male experiences (Cornwall et al. 2011, 103-104; Matfess 2025, 98-95). Other times, women may double down on the patriarchal bargain, demanding their husbands live up to their protective obligations because stepping out of the bargain means losing their respectability and their only remaining claims to security (Kandiyoti 1989, 282). A study conducted by Blaydes and Linzer (2008), which utilized data from the World Values Survey across 18 Muslim-Majority countries, provides weight to this concept, finding that, when women lack economic opportunities and rely entirely on men for financial survival, they will rationally align with fundamentalist gender hierarchies to secure their material safety within the marriage market and home. When these gender hierarchies demand that men provide for the family, it becomes a logical survival strategy for women to demand the fulfilment of that bargain.

The dramatic potential for instability if men feel as though they cannot fulfill the patriarchal bargain means that upholding the regulation of women—both as symbols of culture and ideology, and to enforce the patriarchal dividend—is a matter of utmost importance. As such, the regime will often double down on its gender repression during crises in an attempt to keep the familial patriarchal contract alive, even if the national one is failing. This allows the regime to simultaneously maintain order at the domestic level while also providing an

opportunity to shift the blame away from the regime's failings and onto the liberation efforts of women. Regimes will often create "gender panics," where leaders mobilize anxiety over shifting power dynamics or threatened masculinities, transforming these fears into a moral crusade that rallies and unites the regime's supporters around the ideologies of the state (Çeler 2024, 14, 26). As a result, women outside of the patriarchal bargain are blamed for everything, from family dissolution to the breakdown of the social order, which allows regimes to both redirect anger away from the state and justify further autocratic restrictions in the name of restoring the "natural" gender order (Nouira 2018, 115; Tripp 2019, 201-205). This is often compounded by the framing of gender activists and feminists as dangerous, foreign ideologies that threaten the nation's cultural integrity and state sovereignty (Colman 2025, 8, 13, 18-22; Krizsán and Roggeband 2019, 6; Sutlović 2019, 44-45, 56; Szczygalska 2019, 121, 135-136). This allows them to resist progressive norms and democracy, while positioning their authoritarianism and gendered repression as necessary, patriotic, and paternalistic.

3.4 - Explanation 3: Maintenance of the Coercive Apparatus

One of the most critical institutions for any regime, but especially for an autocratic one, is the coercive apparatus. These institutions, ranging from the military to specialized units to secret police and paramilitary militias, furnish the necessary tools to monitor, co-opt, intimidate, and violently repress domestic and elite opposition (Gerschewski 2013, 21). Frequently, the last line of defence and ideological foot soldiers, so long as these institutions remain robust, adequately funded, and loyal to the regime, autocratic leaders frequently become insulated from both external and internal threats (Kamrava 2023, 8-9; Levitsky and Way 2010, 56-58). Yet, feminist scholarship has consistently demonstrated that the labor and narrative fuel behind these

institutions is almost always maintained by women. Therefore, the coercive apparatus explanation argues that regimes rely on gender hierarchies to sustain the social reproduction and legitimacy of coercive institutions because women are structurally indispensable to the daily operation, ideological legitimation, and biological survival of those institutions.

The “Camp Follower”

In both the historical and contemporary record, women perform the vast majority of the essential logistical tasks that militaries need, but wish to keep ideologically peripheral and cheap (Matfess 2025, 137-138). In her book “Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives,” Enloe (2000, 37, 40-45) illuminates the role of “camp followers,” a mid-17th century military term that referred to civilian women who followed soldiers during periods of war, taking care of logistical tasks. Prior to the 20th century, these women served as cooks, provisioners, laundresses, and nurses, but were dismissed or even belittled by the soldiers they aided (40). She notes that George Washington complained that the women were a “clog upon every movement,” despite the intensive labor they performed to sustain the American Revolution (43). Even the term “camp follower” carried the implication that they were mere dependents, prostitutes, or parasites slowing down or hindering military functions, and by keeping their labor peripheral, militaries were able to extract vital labor in exchange for minimal payment (37, 40-45). However, these women were strategic and resourceful, performing this labor or seeking out relationships with troops as a survival strategy during wartime periods (39). Yet, Enloe highlights that this strategic maneuvering was met with profound anxiety from male commanders, as the camp follower was a woman operating outside of strict patriarchal control,

devising her own individualistic strategy to extract whatever benefits she could from a masculinized military (39).

As a result, militaries moved to institutionalize the camp follower, bringing her back under patriarchal structures where her movements and actions could be formally regulated and adapted to fit the structures of modern national security states or armed insurgencies. Today, the lines of women trailing behind marching soldiers have evolved to massive, permanent military bases where the physical labor of the historical camp follower has been outsourced via private defense contractors to local civilian women for minimal pay or benefits (Enloe 2000, 44; Enloe 2014, 125-126). Through civilianizing these jobs, the military secures its necessary labor while maintaining its hyper-masculinized, combat-focused image. In addition to the physical labor of maintaining military bases, women also perform the grueling physical labor of military nursing, including hauling wounded men, treating horrific combat injuries, and managing disease, all while the military moved to project the profession as feminine and separate from the masculine side of war (Enloe 2000, 218-219). Furthermore, women's physical labor has been utilized in guerrilla movements and armed rebellions. Because patriarchal norms present women as apolitical or innocent, they are often utilized to smuggle weapons, transport goods, and carry illicit messages, yet are often discarded during nation-building efforts after combat has halted (Enloe 2014, 120-121; Matfess 2025, 119).

The emotional labor of modern camp followers has also been institutionalized and professionalized through the creation of the modern military wife. The military wife is a woman who entirely merges her identity and needs with the objectives of the military, and is heavily managed by military social workers, chaplains, and base commanders, who rely on her to seamlessly cater to their husbands and the military as a whole (Enloe 2014, 126-127). She must

demonstrate complete situational adaptability with a cheerful attitude, while providing the unpaid volunteer labor necessary to maintain the base community, hosts social functions, and mentors younger wives to accept the military's strict hierarchies of rank (Enloe 2000, 168; Enloe 2014, 144-145). She remains sexually faithful, never reports domestic violence or complains about hardships, and upon her husband's return, seamlessly relinquishes her head-of-household independence so as not to threaten his masculinity (Enloe 2000, 163-164). In the diplomatic and senior officer spheres, women perform the emotional labor of hosting dinners and cultivating a congenial, domesticated environment where "man to man" trust can be built between potentially adversarial male officials, facilitating international diplomacy and the arms trade (Enloe 2014, 184-185). Women's sexual labor is also incorporated into the formal military world through highly regulated and localized sexual industries clustered around military bases. Modern militaries negotiate International Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) with host countries to manage the zones where male soldiers seek recreation (Enloe 2000, 92-97). To protect the military's reputation and the sexual health of their soldiers, military officials regulate these women through mechanisms like subjecting local prostitutes to strict regulations and vaginal exams to prevent disease and manage soldier morale (91-95). Thus, by organizing brothels around military bases, commanders secure cheap, accessible sexual labor from local or migrant women (often women of color or impoverished women) to ensure that their troops feel like "real men" and heroic conquerors (Enloe 2000, 157). In essence, the entire function of the military and its coercive arms is entirely dependent on women's labor, which is often formally institutionalized and intentionally sidelined, and as such, is only possible if women are contained in their patriarchal roles.

Legitimacy Through The Logic of Masculinist Protectionism

As previously discussed in Explanation 2, the gender as ideological control explanation, regimes often utilize the logic of masculinist protectionism to justify autocratic involvement in the public and private spheres (Young 2003, 4-5). However, this logic also extends to the coercive apparatus, producing the justification for the existence of armed forces, the waging of war, and the demand for civilian obedience by casting the military as the indispensable shield defending a vulnerable population. Rather than presenting military power as naked domination or aggression, the narrative relies on concepts of chivalrous masculinity where the “good” man courageously risks his safety to protect his subordinates (women and children) from evil outside aggressors (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 167-168; Young 2003, 4). Central to this narrative is the linguistic collapsing of adult women and infants into a single, vulnerable category Enloe (as cited in Matfess 2025, 132) refers to as: “womenandchildren” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 15). This grouping effectively strips women of their independent political agency and portrays them as childlike innocents who are naive about the political world (Matfess 2025, 132). By invoking the need to protect “womenandchildren,” military leaders can frame aggressive wars, military build-ups, and domestic repression as urgent matters of national security (132-133). The logic of masculinist protectionism also provides a potent ideological cover for imperialism, colonial expansion, and foreign intervention, which relies on racist and colonial tropes of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (13). Furthermore, the logic extends inwardly, where autocratic states can create a “protection racket,” in which citizens exchange protection for the surrender of civil liberties, the suspension of due process, and absolute, unquestioning obedience (Young 2003, 14). Young (2003) argues that part of that protection racket permits the state to enter a state where it “...threatens or allows men to threaten those women who wish to be

independent of the individualized protection of husbands or boyfriends (14). Not only do the protectors withhold protection from the women who claim autonomy, but they may become attackers.” Consequently, the state utilizes these narratives to exert autocratic control and justify both the existence and the functioning of the state’s coercive apparatus.

Women’s Strategic Military Participation

Critically, similar to how women strategically assumed the role of camp followers to survive, it is necessary to further establish that women are not passive recipients of patriarchal structures. Instead, they may work with them, around them, or against them. A manifestation of this dynamic is the willing participation or enlistment of women in the coercive apparatus, either as soldiers or paramilitary members. While the “camp follower” maneuvers through emotional, sexual, or domestic labor, the female military member is one who actively participates in the masculine structures of the military. This choice is strategic, as the military can function as a source of upward social or economic mobility and a source of protection against gendered violence. For example, African American and Hispanic women in the U.S. military have historically utilized the medical and nursing corps as a primary pathway to achieving officer rank (Enloe 2000), while working-class women enlisted in the U.S. WAVES specifically in pursuit of a way out of poverty (232, 269). This dynamic persists in modern contexts where paramilitary groups present unique educational or employment benefits that women are typically deprived of under normal conditions, while simultaneously protecting the women who join from the gendered violence that paramilitary groups often commit (Golkar 2015, 120). Certainly, some women join because they firmly believe in the cause, often rooted in religious or nationalist beliefs, but often their interests return to maintaining the household and community, where

membership is “not just a matter of religion, but also of an institution that is perceived as privileging them and providing the stability they need to survive” (Matfess 2017, 57). In this way, women engage in “patriarchy trading,” engaging in cost-benefit rationales to determine whether the patriarchal constraints of the military are better or worse than the patriarchal constraints of society at large (101-103). However, this participation is only tolerated when these women do so in a way that upholds the structures and power dynamics of the coercive apparatus, where women perpetuate a “respectable brand of femininity,” which may manifest through the meticulous regulation of women’s military uniforms or how the participating women embody societal and cultural ideals (Enloe 2000, 263-264; Golkar 2015, 81-84). This is because, as will be explored below, transformative feminism and gender equality directly threaten the stability and structures of the military, and as such, any feminine participation must be either contained within the military wife or modern camp follower, or be used to further enforce the objectives of the coercive apparatus.

The Threat of Gender Equality

Because the modern military runs on the under-recognized, underpaid, and strategically marginalized physical, emotional, and sexual labor of women, gender equality and feminism present a direct threat to the very foundation of the coercive apparatus. Feminism has historically argued that the global economy is entirely dependent on the free labor provided by women, with the military being no exception, and as such, and as such, women deserve proper compensation and protections for their work. To demonstrate this, women have successfully utilized mass strikes, such as the famous 1975 Icelandic strike in which 90% of the country’s women refused to do any work for a full day, bringing the country to a grinding halt and inspiring similar

contemporary movements (Matfess 2025, 69-70). If women as a whole begin to demand proper compensation and recognition for their unpaid work, militaries must either adapt and overhaul the entire core systems or utilize repressive measures to force women back into their patriarchal roles.

However, this is far from the only threat that gender equality poses, as gender equality can undermine men's motivations to enlist. Because the military has historically operated as an exclusive proving ground for manhood where the cultural experience surrounds making "men from the boys," women's participation in masculine roles, such as combat roles, cannot be incorporated into that experience without destroying the exclusivity of the masculine achievement (Yuval-Davis 1997, 101). Similarly, when women step into equal military roles, they shatter traditional gender norms that characterize the logic of masculine protection and directly threaten the privileged status of male soldiers (Enloe 2000, 266-267; Kian 2023, 35). Historically, this displacement of traditional femininity has provoked a crisis of masculinity among military men whose identities are grounded in protectionist narratives, often resulting in male soldiers launching slander campaigns or subjecting female peers to sexual harassment to reassert dominance and control (Matfess 2025, 117).

An additional threat stems from the fact that feminism and women's activist groups have historically demanded that the feminine experience of war be addressed. These demand can be exemplified through the creation of the United Nations' Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda: although recent patriarchal backlash has dampened the measure's effectiveness (Sanders and Jenkins, 2022), its four pillars of participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery explicitly call for items like the participation of women in decision-making and planning on matters of peace and security, protecting women and girls from sexual and

gender-based violence during war, and reducing women's vulnerability through improved legal status and accountability (Matfess 2025, 143-145). Explicit demands of women's security not only threaten the structures foundational to military maintenance, but also expose the harmful realities of coercive institutions based in violent conceptions of masculinity and protection.

The final threat feminism poses to the coercive apparatus stems from the erosion of protectionist narratives and the masculine prestige associated with its presence. Militaries and states rely heavily on gender hierarchy to justify their existence, their demand for citizen obedience, and their wars, which fundamentally requires women to be weak and subordinate (Matfess 2025, 109; Yuval-Davis 1997, 4). Without the gendered hierarchy of strong male protectors and weak female dependents, the military loses the primary moral justification for its existence. If true gender equality in the military is achieved, and women are fully and justly integrated into the military structure, their presence may undermine the very protectionist image that sustains the military's—and by extension the state's—public authority and political power under the patriarchal bargain (Enloe 2000, 266-267). Additionally, if the protectionist narrative dissipates across society as a whole, it further erodes the protectionist narrative, making it significantly harder for the regime to justify the presence and authority of the coercive apparatus.

As a result, it is highly logical for regimes to target structures, organizations, and activists calling for gender equality in hopes of preventing larger feminist social movements that would eventually challenge the very structures upon which the military and logic of masculinist protection are built. This logic is particularly potent during crisis periods where the coercive apparatus is necessary to maintain political order or the survival of the regime. In instances of armed conflict, it is of the utmost importance for regimes to ensure the smooth functioning of their militaries, and if these militaries are built upon the labor of women, the state will do

everything in its power to ensure that labor remains consistent. Even during less militaristic crises, like economic disruptions or domestic legitimacy challenges, maintaining a strong coercive apparatus allows the regime to both present the strength necessary to discourage and combat any active or potential social movements, making gender repression a continued priority.

3.5 - Explanation 4: Women as High-Impact Mobilizers

The final explanation for the continued prioritization of gender targeting by regimes during crisis periods pertains to the fact that women are unique, high-impact mobilizers for social movements, providing them with legitimacy, numbers, and bridging capacity. Scholarship has frequently identified that, rather than external threats, the most dangerous threat to any regime is internal. Autocratic heads of government must constantly contend with two distinct domestic threats: the masses and the ruling elite, each sporting a different repertoire of potential threats (Gandhi 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Harrijvan and Weerdesteijn 2020; Thames 2017). To deal with these threats, autocrats frequently utilize inner sanctums, such as consultative councils, ideological paramilitary forces, and political bureaus, to neutralize threats from other political elites, while relying on institutions such as legislatures and political parties to co-opt and neutralize mass movements within society (Gandhi 2009, 74-75; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1280, 1289). For the containment of domestic mass movements, legislatures and political parties provide a controlled arena for oppositional forces to convey their political demands and present political contestation without these interactions appearing as acts of public resistance (Gandhi 2009, 79-80; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 14; Malesky and Schuler 2010, 485). Within this contained institution, autocrats are able to make concessions to appease potential or active mass movements without appearing weak to the general public, as all

processes occur through the regime's legitimate political channels (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 14). Legislatures also allow the regime to control which opposition groups are granted access to that legislature, allowing critical opposition members in, but ensuring that the assembly rules and electoral processes guarantee a massive majority of the legislature is populated by regime-dependent loyalists (Malesky and Schule 2010, 493). In addition, once opposition figures are incorporated into the legislature, they often become invested in the regime's survival and their own privileged status, providing another level of opposition containment (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1280). However, while autocratic nations and projects have increasingly begun utilizing legislatures as co-optation strategies, these institutions remain hollow, which, if not managed correctly, can result in the disillusionment of the population. In this scenario, the legislature is no longer seen as a legitimate vehicle of the people's political demands, re-opening the pathway for mass social movements and other, uncontrolled and unpredictable forms of political contestation.

The "Woman" Factor

When women participate extensively in mass social movements, they fundamentally transform the scale, legitimacy, and social reach of those campaigns, making them significantly more likely to succeed. Movements that marginalize or exclude women artificially reduce their potential pool of participants by at least half, which significantly reduces the scale, impact, and potential maneuvers that the movement can utilize (Chenoweth and Marks 2022, 108). In contrast, depending on the overarching goals of the movement, large-scale incorporation and catering of women brings in more than just the classic, middle-class, "democracy-focused feminist," instead incorporating groups like rural women and homemakers (Breckenmacher,

Jones, and Zihnioğlu 2024, 78). Active incorporation and recruitment of women allows movements to reach the critical mass necessary to disrupt the status quo through large-scale demonstrations such as protests, general strikes, and mass boycotts (108). If executed correctly, these can produce devastating results, bringing entire cities or countries to a standstill and imposing severe economic and political costs on the regime (108). Once incorporated into a movement, even partially, women are then able to act as critical “bridge leaders” within the movement, utilizing their extensive informal and community social networks to recruit new members and build vital ties between smaller, local grassroots movements and the organizational core of larger movements (Brechenmacher and Jones 2024, 15-16). Women are particularly unique in this capability: because they are embedded in neighborhood, family, and community networks (often in part because they are politically and socially limited to such networks through gender hierarchies), they possess the social capital required to bridge the gap between everyday citizens and more abstract, political goals (15-16). Additionally, because women’s identities intersect with class, race, religion, and other identifiers, their bridging capacity is further increased, allowing them to weave together different struggles for rights and justice into broader political movements, expanding the scope and numerical support of that movement (Brechenmacher, Jones, and Zihnioğlu 2024, 82-83). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that domestic feminist activists are essential for “vernacularizing” international law, utilizing global norms like CEDAW to hold their governments accountable by highlighting the gap between a regime’s international posturing and its actual compliance (Htun and Weldon 2012, 588).

Outside of physical numbers, women’s participation also provides mass movements with a profound influx of social, moral, and financial capital, dramatically increasing their legitimacy

in the eyes of both domestic and international observers. Because women frequently draw upon the culturally resonant role of mothers, they are able to make unassailable moral appeals to the public and the regime—a dynamic that is particularly pronounced when a regime bases its legitimacy on the patriarchal bargain and traditional gender hierarchies (Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 407). For example, Palestinian refugee women who had lost children and husbands during extensive conflicts deployed metaphors of “blood and milk” to aggressively critique the PLO leadership following the 1993 peace accords, using their maternal sacrifices to declare that they had given their children’s lives only to be abandoned by the leadership (Peteet 2000, 148-149). Similarly, in Latin America, housewives’ organizations organized purchasing strikes and massive urban protests against the high cost of living by arguing that the regimes’ economic policies were causing their children to go hungry (Hughes and Paxton 2014, 269). By appealing to their status as mothers, the regime must either admit that it failed to uphold the patriarchal bargain or provide concessions to prove it still is in effect.

In addition to moral appeals, scholarship identifies the pattern that, when women are placed at the front lines of a movement, they actively moderate the behavior of both protesters and state police and counterprotest forces. Chenoweth and Marks (2022, 109-110) highlight that, on the side of the protesters, having women present and integrated into the movement makes movements significantly less likely to fully embrace violence or develop radical, violent flanks in response to regime crackdowns. Instead, their participation produces a de-escalatory dynamic that aids in maintaining strict nonviolent discipline across the movement (109-110). Furthermore, women’s presence also often moderates police and military behavior during counterprotest deployments. Because women are often culturally positioned as figures deserving or necessitating protection, along with deeply ingrained gendered taboos of inflicting public

violence on women, regimes and regime forces face dramatically higher political costs if they choose to violently repress movements with visible female participation (109-110). Not only do these costs risk mobilizing even more segments of the population, but critically, they can result in regime forces disobeying orders (or even defecting) and loyalty shifts among both the regimes' coercive apparatus and domestic base of support. While defections are relatively rare for personnel with investments in the maintenance of the regime, when soldiers are ordered to fire upon or physically attack crowds prominently featuring women, the moral dissonance often proves too great, causing security forces to question the status quo and ultimately refuse their orders—even if they don't ultimately defect and leave their positions (108). Women's involvement also provides mass movements with a new, unique repertoire of culturally gendered tactics only available to women. Through history, women have utilized their bodies and attire to stigmatize or mock opponents, utilizing tactics ranging from protesting naked or topless, like in Kenya, Nigeria, and France, to tactics of shaming, such as Algerian grandmothers successfully commanding riot police to go home by threatening to report their "bad behavior" to their mothers (108-109).

However, while the benefit of adding women to a mass movement is clear, it's important to reveal a critical distinction: not all women's mobilization is feminist in nature, and having women in a movement does not automatically guarantee feminist concessions from the regime. Molyneux (1985, 232-233) highlights that, because women experience vastly different realities based on class, ethnicity, and culture, there is no such thing as a single, homogenous category of "women's interests." Instead, she separates them into two categories: practical gender interests and strategic gender interests. Strategic gender interests center around the analysis of women's subordination and the formulation of alternative, feminist social arrangements, and are frequently

based on ethical and theoretical criteria aimed at achieving women's emancipation. Practical gender interests, on the other hand, are derived from the concrete, everyday conditions of women's positioning within the gendered divisions of labor, formulated in response to immediate perceived needs. Waylen (1994, 336-337) and Molyneux herself (1985, 233) indicate that it is practical gender interests that drive most women to bear the costs of leaving the home to protest, rather than strategic ones. This reality explains why not all movements incorporating women produce feminist demands (although some may), and why, often, feminist outcomes are not guaranteed simply due to the participation of women.

Regime Responses: Co-Opt, Restrict, Repress

The moral legitimacy, social capital, and bridging capacity of women highlight their presence and participation in social movements as a major, substantive threat to autocratic regimes, increasing the likelihood of movement success. However, because the outright, violent repression of women often backfires, regimes are left with three options to prevent, delay, or suppress women's involvement in mass social movements. The first of these options is co-optation through the usage of non-transformative gender initiatives, state-run women's organizations, and economic incentives. Electoral gender quotas function as a top-down gender reform that often provides descriptive representation without substantive representation to provide domestic concessions while also projecting modernity to the international community—often called gender-washing (Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 403-405). This co-opts women into the confines of the legislature, presenting women with a controlled path to voice political contestation, while in reality, only allowing women tied to male party leadership or the patriarchal status quo to hold office (Matfess 2025, 38-39; Valdini 2019, 12, 154; Hughes and

Paxton 2014, 172). Alternatively or simultaneously, regimes may actively work to dismantle women's participation by forcing them into GONGOs or official political parties, such as the National Council for Women in Mubarak's Egypt, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), and the KADEM in Turkey (Khamis and Mili 2018b, 12; Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 399; Bräuer 2018, 225-227). By restricting access and consultative access to other women's organizations, regimes sideline independent feminist organizations and funnel women into state-loyal groups who pose no transformative threat to the regime (Krizan and Roggeband 2019, 7; Krizan and Sebestyen 2019, 94-95). This pattern of co-optation forces women into controlled political environments where their demands can be regulated, illuminating the seemingly contradictory pattern of patriarchal regimes providing non-transformative, surface-level gender reforms. Further backing the drive to co-opt women's organizations is Htun and Weldon's (2012) study regarding the success of autonomous women's organizations in driving progressive legislation. In a comparative analysis of 70 countries over four decades, they statistically proved that the mobilization of feminist movements and organizations in civil society is the single most critical factor in forcing states to adopt progressive policy changes, proving statistically more relevant than having women in the legislature, the presence of leftist political parties, or national wealth. Specifically, they highlight that, when women self-organize independent of the state or political parties, they develop "oppositional consciousness" that reflects their distinct experiences and allows them to prioritize their own agendas (553). Consequently, when autonomous women do not have to subordinate their goals to male-dominated party leadership or GONGOs, they are free to challenge male privilege and the established social order (553). Thus, given the empirical power behind autonomous women's organizations, it is entirely rational to contain these women within GONGOs in order to prevent them from developing oppositional

consciousness, forcing them to argue for the relevance of their concerns within institutions that already have defined patriarchal gender priorities (553).

The second option is to divide and conquer: painting feminists as dangerous and selectively repressing them to divide broader social movements by forcing participants to choose between supporting feminist factions and, in turn, face the same repression, or turn away for the sake of the movement. As previously discussed, indiscriminate repression is particularly costly compared to selective repression, as it causes bystanders to choose sides, leading to the potential for increased mobilization (Lichbach 1998, 63). Consequently, to preemptively deter autonomous women's movements, regimes frequently frame feminists and gender equity advancements as dangerous agents of foreign imperialism or moral decay (Colmán 2025, 8, 13, 18-22; Marczewski 2024, 21-22). This rhetoric is particularly effective at splitting women's participation, forcing them to choose between their national or religious identities and their practical demands, and their feminist aspirations (Enloe 2014, 123; Nayereh 1994, 121-127). For many women, choosing their feminist aspirations results in being framed as a traitor to their culture, along with social isolation, providing a powerful incentive for women to avoid participating in feminist movements (Nayereh 1994, 120-121). To further alienate feminists from broader pro-democracy movements, regimes frequently exploit cultural taboos by hyper-sexualizing feminist activists as lesbians, prostitutes, or anti-family extremists, resulting in cultural backlash designed to dismiss them as degenerate to the community (Enloe 2014, 118; Tripp 2019, 275). Furthermore, regimes often selectively repress feminist organizations, individuals, or businesses associated with feminism, through harassment and business closures (Golkar 2015, 79; Golkar 2026, 5). By splitting the movement through language, the regime is able to justify selective repression, allowing it to circumvent the cultural backlash of repressing

women, while simultaneously dividing larger pro-democracy movements and instituting a chilling effect regarding the regime's willingness to utilize violence.

The final option is to double down on existing restrictions on women's political power, legally and culturally confining them to the private sphere. At the ideological level, regimes heavily utilize the imagery of women as "mothers of the nation" to socially restrict women to the primary role of domestic caregiving and child-rearing (Panreck 2018, 219-126). The burden of household labor then functions to severely restrict the time, energy, and resources women have available to participate in formal politics or collective organization (Obuch 2018, 145-146). This is often institutionally reinforced through family laws and penal codes that mandate that a woman obtain explicit permission from her husband, father, or brother to travel, conduct business, or leave the house (Chenoweth and Marks 2022, 103-104; Moghadam 2013, 98-99). To further discourage political participation, regimes may offer targeted financial rewards to mothers and homemakers, successfully fostering a dependence on the state that secures political loyalty and significantly decreases women's likelihood of participating in resistance movements that threaten the patriarchal bargain (Matfess 2025, 32-33; Suteu 2025, 74; Szczygielska 2019, 129).

Regardless of whether regimes utilize one tactic or all three simultaneously, the goal remains the same: because women act as high-impact mobilizers for social movements, regimes have a strategic incentive to limit their participation in those movements. They may co-opt or restrict in a preemptive attempt to quell participation, or may selectively repress and demonize in an attempt to divide larger coalitions, but the intentions remain the same regardless of the method. Critically, the need to limit women's participation becomes dramatically pronounced during crisis periods, where the costs of protesting are outweighed by the realities of the regime's

economic or social failures, prompting many women to leave their homes and take to the streets as a result of practical gender needs.

3.5 - Conclusion

Ultimately, the literature suggests that gender targeting in autocratic regimes is far from an irrational byproduct of religious or cultural traditionalism, but is instead a calculated, multi-dimensional strategy for regime survival. From the rational-choice perspective of cheap, effective, strategic repression to the deep-seated institutional and symbolic maintenance of the patriarchal state and bargain, the regulation of women serves as the bedrock for both ideological legitimacy and coercive stability. Furthermore, as women stand as high-impact mobilizers capable of rallying increased domestic support and utilizing a unique repertoire of tactics for social disruption, the regime's incentive to preemptively demobilize them becomes an existential imperative. By weaving together the "soft" power of benevolent paternalism with the hard power of the patriarchal bargain, autocracies create a racket of control that scales from the family unit to the national legislature. In periods of crisis, these dynamics converge, prompting the state to double down on its tactics in an attempt to regain control, maintain legitimacy, and ensure the survival of the regime. Having established this theoretical framework, the following section will apply these four explanations to the Islamic Republic of Iran, examining how the regime's shifting but constant gender policies reflect a desperate effort to maintain the patriarchal contract and secure the state's survival against an increasingly feminized pool of dissent.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Expectations and Methodology

4.1 - Theoretical Expectations

A thorough examination of the existing literature has revealed four distinct, potential explanations for why autocratic regimes continue to target women, even during periods of crisis such as economic sanctions, armed conflict, and domestic legitimacy challenges. The low-cost repression explanation revolves around the usefulness of low-intensity repression in maintaining the patrilineal foundations of autocratic regimes. The gender as ideological control explanation details why the regulation of women, their mobility, and their domestic lives remains a critical priority for regimes and their ability to uphold a dual form of the patriarchal bargain: one with individual male citizens and one with the nation as a whole. The coercive apparatus explanation pertains to the maintenance of the coercive apparatus, highlighting how traditional gender roles and tight regulations of women's labor uphold the daily functions and reproduction of the state's coercive institutions. Finally, the women as mobilizers explanation asserts that the continued restriction of women's rights and the ability to participate in social movements functions as a preemptive attempt to contain high-impact mobilizers within either state institutions or the home.

The following section will be dedicated to outlining the expectations for each of the four explanations within the context of a single-case study: the Islamic Republic of Iran, a nation where gender has been symbolic and highly regulated since the nation's conception. This section derives observable implications for each explanation and specifies how they will be evaluated in the Iranian context. All four explanations produce gendered repression; thus, it is not the presence of repression that will be evaluated, but the surrounding context, discourse, and type of repression that will be utilized to determine the applicability of the four explanations. Critically,

while presented separately for analytical clarity, these explanations should not be understood as competing theories that seek to identify a single cause of gender targeting. Instead, they may represent distinct but interconnected dimensions through which gender repression operates and manifests. Explicitly, Explanation 1 focuses on the tactical deployment of repression, Explanation 2 emphasizes ideological legitimacy and social control, Explanation 3 highlights the institutional reproduction of coercive power, and Explanation 4 addresses the management of mobilization threats. As such, a regime may simultaneously employ multiple dimensions of gender targeting, with certain dimensions becoming more salient than others depending on the political context or nature of the crisis.

Explanation 2: Women as Symbols

As discussed in the literature review, Explanation 2, gender repression as ideological control, operates through two closely related mechanisms. First, because regimes frequently position women as the primary symbolic and physical vessels of cultural and ideological identity, regulating women then becomes a way to regulate the nation (Enloe 2014, 108; Moghadam 1994, 2-3; Moghadam 2013, 41; Yuval-Davis 1997, 23, 26, 29-30, 33-35). In this way, women are positioned as vulnerable symbols of the nation at its purest, allowing the nation itself to be framed as vulnerable through the logic of masculinist protection, which in turn presents the regime as both a valiant protector and a benevolent paternal figure. For analytical purposes, this first mechanism will be known as Explanation 2A: the symbolic control sub-mechanism. Second, using this very logic, the state then enters into a dual patriarchal bargain: one with men, where the enforcement of gender hierarchies provides men with the patriarchal dividend, and one with the nation as a whole, where the regime positions itself as a paternal provider in exchange for

absolute domestic obedience (Connell 2005, 82-84; Fallon 2010, 48-50; Kian 2023, 29-30; Walby 1989, 221; Young 2003, 4-5). While men are subordinated to the state in this framework, the patriarchal dividend they receive within the household serves as a compensatory mechanism, reinforcing their investment in the existing order (Pateman 1988, as cited in Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020, 19). Similarly, this mechanism will be referred to as Explanation 2B: the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism. Regardless, both rely on the complete subjugation of women, and as such, gender equality—particularly during times of crisis—becomes a direct threat to the very systems upon which the legitimacy of autocratic rule is based. This explanation is expected to be particularly potent in explaining the Iranian regime’s intense focus on traditional, heteropatriarchal family structures and the enforcement of women’s dress and conduct.

If the symbolic control sub-mechanism holds merit in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and women function as symbolic and cultural reproducers of the nation, one would expect consistent and visible enforcement of markers of national identity, particularly the hijab and chadour. Because the hijab is a highly visible manifestation of the country’s revolutionary identity and fight against a perceived Western cultural invasion, this thesis predicts that this enforcement will remain highly visible and relatively aggressive during periods of crisis as a way to reinstitute regime authority. This should also be reflected in regime rhetoric that frames the hijab, motherhood, and adherence to revolutionary Islamic ideals as natural and positive, concurrently with rhetoric that frames progressive measures as both dangerous and, given the country’s explicit stance against the West, foreign-imported.

If the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism holds merit, and the regime relies on a dual patriarchal bargain to secure loyalty and stabilize authority, one should expect to see the

institutionalization of gender hierarchies within the legal and political structures of the country. This includes the codification of women's subordination in family laws and penal codes, which functions as a way to reassure men of the durability of the patriarchal bargain, as legal codes function as both an enforcement mechanism and a signal of the regime's commitment to maintaining the patriarchal dividend. Additionally, regime discourse should reflect forms of benevolent paternalism, framing restrictions on women as protective rather than oppressive, thereby reinforcing the state's role as a paternal authority. Consequently, it is likely that the institutionalization process occurred early in the country's history to ensure the consolidation of power in a volatile, revolutionary context.

Furthermore, this thesis predicts that, in the aftermath of major social movements, the regime will either double down on existing measures, particularly those enforcing symbols like the hijab, or expand them in an attempt to reassert ideological control after destabilization. Additionally, during periods of crisis or flourishing women's civil society, one can also expect to observe the reaffirmation, defense, or symbolic reinforcement of existing legal codes that give men disproportionate power in the household. Simply put, the symbolic control sub-mechanism escalates through visibility, while the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism stabilizes through reassurance. Importantly, this form of enforcement is distinct from measures aimed at preemptively containing social movements, as its primary function is the maintenance of women's symbolic role and the durability of the patriarchal contract. If these predictions manifest, it would show that, not only do gender hierarchies define the nation symbolically, but they also structure the distribution of power and compensation within it, linking identity formation to regime stability. As such, this thesis expects the gender as ideological control explanation (Explanation 2) to hold strong explanatory power for gender targeting within Iran.

Explanation 4: Women as High-Impact Mobilizers

The women as mobilizers explanation, highlights women as high-impact mobilizers who carry unique social and moral legitimacy, have intersectional identities that allow them to act as bridge makers, and have access to a unique repertoire of protest tactics (Brechenmacher and Jones 2024, 15-16; Brechenmacher, Jones, and Zihnioğlu 2024, 78, 82-83; Chenoweth and Marks 2022, 108; Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 407). In response to the increased success rate that social movements with women boast, regimes then move to either co-opt, selectively repress, or double down on existing laws and regulations aimed at increasing the cost of women's mobilization (Chenoweth and Marks 2022, 103-104; Matfess 2025, 32-33; Moghadam 2013, 98-99; Obuch 2018, 145-146; Panreck 2018, 215-126; Suteu 2025, 74; Szczygieska 2019, 129).

As addressed in Chapter Two, the Islamic Republic is no stranger to protest movements, as large-scale protests and demonstrations have followed the nation since its conception. As such, this thesis predicts that during and after protests, crackdowns on women's rights and civil society organizations will spike as a reaction to the presence of women visibly participating in social movements. One can expect the co-optation of civil society and women's organizations through funding cuts and institutional or bureaucratic hurdles, while state-run GONGOs receive disproportionate funding and access to resources, while facing fewer bureaucratic hurdles. It can also be expected that the state selectively represses, both high-intensity and low-intensity, feminist activists, unveiled women, and anyone the state associates with aiding unveiled women. This may take the form of harassment and arrests of unveiled women, or closures of businesses that allow unveiled women. Furthermore, we should see the targeting and demonization of

high-profile feminists in an attempt to divide the larger population, raising the perceived costs of being associated with feminism. By raising the perceived costs associated with having a movement where women are visibly present, social movements may be hesitant to incorporate them out of fear that their presence will increase the chances of violent regime response, creating a dynamic of preemptive containment. One can also expect to see the doubling down on existing anti-gender equality legislation and protocols as an attempt to regain control and assert power over those participating in the movement, for if a regime can successfully raise the costs of women's autonomous organization or participation in social movements, it eliminates a major threat multiplier. Thus, one should observe a mix of reactive dynamics and preemptive dynamics. In specific, this thesis predicts that high-intensity repression should be largely reactive during the early days of the Islamic Republic, while transitioning to become more preemptive through co-optation and selective repression as ideological containment fails. There should also be an escalation in enforcement and repression following each mass movement that prominently features women—particularly after the 2009 Green Movement and after the Women, Life, Freedom movement. If these predictions come to fruition, then this thesis expects the women as mobilizers explanation to be highly applicable in explaining Iran's consistent targeting of women's rights.

Explanation 3: The Coercive Apparatus

The coercive apparatus explanation positions the state's insistence on enforcing gender hierarchies as a necessary step to maintain the social reproduction and legitimacy of coercive institutions. Autocrats need a strong coercive apparatus, and because coercive institutions are structured around masculinized identities and protectionist narratives, the essential labor that

women provide is strategically sidelined to maintain that image. Furthermore, women are the base of the institutions' narrative, with the defense of women or an anthropomorphized version of the state being a core element. Because the coercive apparatus relies on the subordination of women to sustain the institution's functions and legitimacy, transformative gender equality within the coercive apparatus threatens its existing stability, as it would demand compensation for women's unpaid labor, dismantle protectionist narratives, and expose the dangers of a masculinized military (Enloe 2000, 266-267; Kian 2023, 35; Matfess 2025, 69-70, 143-145; Yuval-Davis 1997, 101).

If this explanation holds, one would expect to see coercive institutions reflect and reproduce gender hierarchy in their internal organization and external functions. This may include the systematic restriction of women's roles within such institutions, limiting their participation to specific domains that reinforce, rather than challenge, existing hierarchies. These patterns would not merely mirror broader social norms, but would serve to stabilize institutional identity and cohesion by embedding gender hierarchy into the structure of authority itself. In the context of Iran, this may manifest as limiting women's participation in the IRGC and Basij, or limiting them to roles that mimic domestic duties, such as childcare and nursing. Higher roles, especially those that are more militant within the IRGC, would be classified as off-limits to women. One would also expect coercive institutions to extend beyond conventional security functions and participate in monitoring public behavior, enforcing norms related to dress and conduct, and maintaining boundaries between acceptable and deviant social practices. In this sense, coercive bodies would operate not only as instruments of physical force but also as mechanisms of social discipline that help reproduce the broader system of control. Additionally, if gender hierarchies play a central role in sustaining coercive institutions, one would expect to

observe internal and external narratives linking social stability, moral order, and institutional strength. Gendered roles, particularly those related to protection, family structure, and social responsibility, may be framed as contributing to the durability and legitimacy of the regime's security apparatus. These narratives would reinforce the idea that maintaining gender hierarchies is not simply a cultural preference but a mandatory component of political stability.

However, it is critical to note that the strength of this mechanism may vary across contexts, along with being complementary to other explanations, meaning the patterns identified in Chapter Five may not constitute a fully independent mechanism. The involvement of coercive institutions in enforcing gender hierarchy may instead simultaneously work to sustain said institutions and reflect the implementation of broader symbolic and ideological objectives associated with gender regulation. In this sense, coercive bodies may function as an instrument through which gendered norms are enforced, rather than as institutions whose survival is fundamentally dependent on those norms. This distinction becomes particularly relevant in contexts where coercive institutions are also sustained through clientelistic or material incentives, suggesting gender hierarchy may play a complementary role as opposed to a stand-alone, foundational one. Furthermore, the mechanisms outlined in the coercive apparatus explanation may overlap with those associated with symbolic and ideological control, particularly where narratives of masculinist protection and benevolent paternalism link gender order to broader claims about political authority. In such contexts, coercive institutions may operate alongside, and in conjunction with, symbolic frameworks of gender regulation.

Explanation 1: Low-Cost Repression

The low-cost repression explanation argues that regimes may continue to prioritize gender repression even during crises because it's cheap, symbolic, and politically useful relative to more overt forms of repression. While regimes often avoid high-intensity repression of women due to the risks of large-scale backlash, low-intensity repression, such as surveillance, dress code enforcement, and restrictions on women's organizations, presents regimes with a cheap but politically important tool of control (Levitsky and Way 2010, 366-367; Roggeband and Krizán 2024, 403). Specifically, by repressing women, the regime produces a society-wide chilling effect designed to prevent broader political mobilization against the regime, while simultaneously enforcing the Patrilineal Syndrome upholding society (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020, 2-3, 12-14, 119, 127, 326-328; Levitsky and Way 2010, 366-367; Moghadam 2013, 118-119). While this explanation is empirically sound within the existing literature, its application to the Iranian context is expected to be limited and weak in comparison to the alternative explanations.

Because the focus of the low-cost repression explanation is that of low-intensity repression, if it were to hold weight in the Iranian context, we can expect to see a primary reliance on low-intensity repression as a substitute for more overt, high-intensity measures. This could manifest as frequent enforcement of public dress codes, particularly via delegating enforcement to the volunteer Basij militia in an attempt to distance the regime itself from its repression, along with funding cuts to, or outright bans on, autonomous women's organizations. It would also likely manifest through constant social fear of informal surveillance networks, given the massive scope of the Basij and its involvement within society.

However, it is important to note that a hallmark of the low-cost repression explanation is the consistent and largely exclusive use of low-intensity repression in order to avoid the potential for backlash in the case of high-intensity repression, while also producing an effective, chilling effect on society designed to raise the perceived costs of dissent. This indicates that low-cost repression is most potent in contexts where the regime faces constrained coercive capacity, high costs of repression, or international or domestic scrutiny that makes overt repression risky. Yet, the historical record highlights that the Islamic Republic, as a result of the country's closed loop of authority and institutional durability, is not afraid of utilizing high-intensity repression alongside low-intensity repression. In particular, the extensive patronage network between the regime and its coercive apparatus lowers the chances of defection and dramatically increases members' loyalty—a configuration known as a patrimonial military (Bellin 2012, 132-133). While low-intensity repression produces a chilling effect, high-intensity repression visibly and dramatically demonstrates the state's will to use violence, presenting potential protesters or dissenters with a visible and potent warning of the consequences of mobilization. This dramatically increases the costs associated with protesting, creating an environment where the knowledge of the state's will is a powerful tool of dissuasion. While low-intensity repression is clearly present in Iran, it does not function as a substitute for high-intensity repression, as would be predicted by the low-cost repression explanation. Thus, if the Iranian regime, which is fully capable and willing to utilize high-intensity repression, decides to also utilize low-intensity repression in tandem, it suggests that gender-targeted, low-intensity repression cannot be fully explained by cost-efficiency or backlash avoidance, leading to a weak application to the Iranian context. This will be investigated in Chapter 5.

Table: Expected Observable Implications in Iran

Explanation	Core Logic	Key Expected Observable Implications in Iran	Expected Strength
E1: Low-Cost Repression	Regimes prefer low-cost, low-risk repression	Predominant use of surveillance, harassment, and bureaucratic restrictions; limited reliance on high-intensity repression;	Weak
E2A: Women as Symbols	Women represent national identity and legitimacy	Consistent enforcement of hijab; gender norms embedded in law; comparing unveiled women to threats or traitors, rhetoric framing the hijab as glorified or emancipatory	Strong
E2B: The Patriarchal Bargain	The patriarchal bargain is utilized to enforce submission in the nation and the household	Early institutionalization of the patriarchal bargain; rhetorical reaffirmation of the patriarchal bargain, defensive legal reinforcement, symbolic signaling to men, and selective tightening of laws or initiatives designed to institutionalize the patriarchal bargain	Strong
E3: Coercive Apparatus	Gender hierarchy sustains institutional structure	Coercive institutions (e.g., IRGC/Basij) engaged in the enforcement of social and moral norms, including gender regulation; Gender hierarchies reflected in the internal organization of coercive institutions, including restrictions on women's roles or authority; rhetoric linking social order, discipline, and gender norms to political stability	Moderate/ Conditional
E4: Mobilization Threat	Women increase protest success	Crackdowns spike after protests; targeting of women activists; co-optation of civil society; escalation of gender laws	Strong

Conclusion

Based on the preceding theoretical framework, this thesis proposes four hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Explanation 1, the low-cost repression explanation, produces a weak application to the Iranian context, as the state utilizes a mix of high-intensity and low-intensity repression, contradicting one of the core claims of the explanation.
- Hypothesis 2: Explanation 2, the gender as ideological control explanation, will have a strong application to the Iranian context.
- Hypothesis 3: Explanation 3, the coercive apparatus explanation, has a conditional and supporting application to the Iranian context, but the clientelistic nature of the coercive apparatus suggests that gender is not the only mechanism upholding the coercive apparatus.
- Hypothesis 4: Explanation 4, the women as mobilizers explanation, will have a strong application to the Iranian context.

The next chapter of the thesis will utilize process tracing, deductive reasoning, and discourse analysis to evaluate the explanations against the available evidence.

4.2 - Methodology, Data, and Limitations

Research Design, Analytical Approach, and Operationalization:

The goal of the study is to explain why regimes engage in gender targeting, and as such, it adopts a positivist, explanation-driven research design, utilizing deductive reasoning by identifying four theoretical explanations as to why regimes continuously target women's rights, and specifying the observable implications for each (Yin 2003, 22, 28-31, 36). These explanations will then be evaluated against empirical evidence from the Iranian case to assess their explanatory power (27). While designs based on deductive logic are often associated with quantitative methods, they can also be suitable in a qualitative context, particularly when testing

existing theories or producing analytic narratives (Yom 2024, 621, 632). Because this thesis is testing the application of four existing theories to a holistic single-case study, it suits deductive logic particularly well. As such, the goal of the design is to evaluate whether observed patterns match theoretical expectations. In terms of design, a single-case study was selected as it is a particularly useful design for investigating a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (targeting women's rights) and the context (the crisis period) are tightly entangled (Yin 2003, 13). Furthermore, Iran functions as a representative case, which is designed to capture and examine the circumstances and conditions of an everyday, typical situation—which, given how pervasive attacks on women's rights are in autocratic contexts (Chenoweth and Marks 2022), Iran not only represents these “typical” conditions, but also functions as a highly visible manifestation of those conditions (Yin 2003, 10).

The main methodological tools utilized within this project are process tracing and elements of discourse analysis. Specifically, the analysis employs process tracing to examine how gender-targeted repression evolves across key periods of crisis. A major prerequisite for this method is the establishment of prior knowledge to deduce hypotheses, a process that can be seen in the previous section (Collier 2011, 824). By identifying sequences of events, such as protest emergence, regime response, and subsequent policy changes, this approach allows for the evaluation of whether observed patterns align with the causal mechanisms proposed by each explanation. To evaluate explanations centered on ideology and legitimacy, this thesis incorporates elements of discourse analysis, examining the role of regime rhetoric, official statements, and legal language as evidence. This is particularly relevant for the gender as

ideological control explanation, where gender functions as a symbolic and ideological construct, but also supports the analysis of how the regime frames threats and justifies repression.

Each explanation is evaluated based on distinct observable implications. The gender as ideological control explanation is assessed through evidence of symbolic regulation, gendered rhetoric, and legal codifications of gender hierarchy. The women as mobilizers explanation is evaluated through patterns of repression surrounding protest cycles, including co-optation, selective repression, and escalation following periods of unrest. The coercive apparatus explanation is examined through the structure and role of coercive institutions, including their involvement in moral enforcement and the integration of gender norms into their operation. The low-cost repression explanation is assessed through the prevalence of low-intensity repression relative to high-intensity measures. To systematically capture the forms of gender-targeted repression, this thesis incorporates the analytical framework developed by Çavdar and Yaşar (2026, 12), which conceptualizes attacks on gender equality as an early warning sign of autocratization and creates a novel framework for measuring the erosion of gender equity. They identify five dimensions through which regimes target gender, which this thesis defines as:

1. Discursive delegitimization: The use of political rhetoric, official statements, and media framing to portray gender equality as illegitimate, immoral, foreign, or threatening, while simultaneously presenting traditional gender roles as natural, virtuous, or essential to national identity.
2. Dismantling or reframing policies: The formal removal, revision, or reinterpretation of gender-related laws and policies in ways that weaken protections for women or reorient them toward traditional or regime-aligned gender roles.
3. Undermining implementation: Situations in which formal gender-related policies or protections remain in place, but are weakened in practice through non-enforcement, selective enforcement, or administrative barriers, effectively limiting their real-world impact.

4. Erosion of accountability: The weakening or elimination of institutions, organizations, or channels that allow women to participate politically, advocate for rights, or hold the state accountable, including the restriction or co-optation of civil society.
5. Increasing inequality in the market or household: Policies and practices that reinforce or expand gender disparities in economic participation, labor roles, and family structures, consolidating women's dependence within the household or broader economy.

In this thesis, these categories are not treated as independent explanations, but rather as observable dimensions through which the four theoretical mechanisms manifest. This framework allows for a more systematic classification of empirical evidence, enabling clearer comparison between expected and observed patterns of gender-targeted repression.

This thesis will utilize a combination of primary and secondary sources to examine the application of each of the four explanations. Primary sources include the Iranian Constitution, family laws and penal codes, official speeches by either Ayatollah Khomeini or Khamenei, official regime news outlets, interviews, and primary human rights documentation. Secondary sources will include academic books and analyses from think tanks or human rights organizations to contextualize primary evidence.

Chapter 5: Analysis

5.1 - Explanation 2A: Women as Symbols

Epoch 1: Foundational Consolidation (1979-1989):

The symbolic control sub-mechanism predicts that regimes will use women's bodies as symbolic markers to define the boundaries of the nation. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this mechanism is particularly evident during the foundational consolidation period, Epoch 1, where the regime rapidly transformed the hijab into the defining symbol of revolutionary identity. This transformation did not occur in a vacuum, but rather, within a highly fragmented and competitive post-revolutionary environment. The initial power vacuum after the fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty was divided among various political, religious, and civilian factions. However, by late 1979, the Khomeinist faction had successfully orchestrated a "second Islamic Revolution," where, from roughly June 1981 to 1982, the country entered a low-intensity civil war between the clerical establishment and leftist and Marxist-Islamic factions (Alimagham 2020, 33-34; Ostovar 2016, 61). The state unleashed a brutal campaign of repression to destroy the opposition groups, ultimately succeeding in establishing and consolidating absolute clerical control (Alimagham 2020, 14). Critical to this process was the "Islamic Cultural Revolution," characterized by a cultural and ideological purge of secular and leftist factions and the persecution of minority groups through their removal from government positions, executions of their leaders, and the closing of their temples (177). The goal was simple: purify the country of "imported" ideologies and Western influence—a task made significantly easier in the wake of the country's intense anti-imperialist sentiment following the highly repressive rule of the pro-American Pahlavi Dynasty (Moghadam 2013, 117; Sedghi 2009, 204-206). Inherent in that

simple goal was the creation of a strict “us” versus “them,” with the “us” being defined within the boundaries of Islamic Revolutionary ideals, and the “them” being Western imperialism. It was within this context that this thesis argues that the immediate pivot to mandatory veiling was not merely a religious mandate, but a deliberate political strategy to create a symbolic border guard, drawing a stark cultural boundary between the “authentic” Islamic nation and the “immoral” West (Sedghi 2009, 209-210, 278-279; Yuval-Davis 1997, 23).

Prior to the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini’s public dialogue surrounding women was surprisingly progressive, utilizing strategic ambiguity, anti-imperialistic sentiment, and promises of women having “complete freedom in everything they do, just as men are free—in everything” (Khomeini 1978, quoted in Ansary 2015, 96). In an interview with *the Guardian*, he claimed that “Women are free in the Islamic Republic—in the selection of their activities, in their future, and their clothing” (Khomeini 1978, quoted in Ansary 2015, 96), mirroring comments made to a delegate from *Amnesty International* regarding women’s ability to participate in government, where he stated “Women play a significant role in building an Islamic society; Islam promotes women to where they can realize their humanistic values in the society, and more beyond the boundaries of being simply an object, and along with such growth, they can assume responsibilities in constructing an Islamic government” (Khomeini 1978, quoted in Karimi 2018, 137). This rhetoric was particularly useful during the revolution, where a wide coalition of support was necessary to overthrow the Pahlavi Dynasty. However, once Khomeini and the clergy began to consolidate power, the need for a wide coalition of revolutionaries evolved into a need to consolidate power and quickly define regime identity—and the hijab was the chosen symbol to do so.

The roots of this transition began as early as February 1979, with Khomeini giving a speech to theology students where he stated that “Islamic women should appear with Islamic hijab to not degrade themselves” (Khomeini 1979, quoted in Sotoudeh 2023, 14). Then, in a speech given on March 4, 1979, he began drawing boundaries by arguing that the Shah’s policies of forced unveiling treated women as “playthings,” “objects,” and “made-up dolls” in the name of Western progress, while mocking the Shah’s version of freedom by pointing out that veiled women were prevented from attending school (Khomeini 2008, 6:263). Through this rhetoric, he created the symbolic marker of “them”: unveiled women. Simultaneously, Khomeini framed the hijab not as an instrument of oppression, but as an emancipatory shield and a profound symbol of militant strength, dignity, and anti-imperialist resistance. In one such speech, he claimed that the Pahlavi Dynasty had degraded women through veiling by turning them into sexual commodities and “pleasure-seekers,” and that the Islamic dress code offered them a necessary refuge (Khomeini 1981, 237). Thus, in this framing, the hijab was presented as an emancipatory force that rescued women from the objectification of the West, creating an image of an exalted, free woman adorned in a hijab as one of the defining symbols of the revolution’s struggle against its oppressors.

By March 6, 1979, Khomeini made the official decree that marked the beginning of mandatory veiling in the country, stating that “uncovered women should not come to Islamic ministries” (including government buildings) and mandating that women working there must observe religious coverings. While the decree caused enough backlash that the regime temporarily withdrew its position as a “recommendation,” by July 5th, government officials began officially enforcing the decree, barring women from entering or working in government buildings without proper Islamic head coverings (Esfandiari 1997, 19; Karimi 2018, 87). Even

massive pushback against the regime in the form of the International Women's Day protests presented Khomeini with another avenue to define the country's markers of belonging as, in an interview in November of 1979, he claimed demonstrators were not "the right ones," but rather "the women who were termed by the Shah as 'liberated women' and corrupted by him," and whom "wanted to engage in debauchery" (Khomeini 2008, 11:105-106).

This dynamic became more pronounced during the Iran-Iraq War, where the regime explicitly linked women's compliance with the dress code to the sacrifices of male soldiers at the front (Moghadam 2013, 31). Women who resisted or wore improper hijabs were harassed by zealots and admonished to "feel shame before the corpses of martyrs" (31). Furthermore, the state deployed female vigilantes known as the "Zaynab Sisters" to aggressively patrol the streets and interrogate or beat unveiled women in an attempt to coerce them into veiling through citizen pressure, threats, and vigilante violence (Afary 2009, 270). The regime utilized these women further to define the boundaries of "us" versus "them" through the hijab, touting phrases like "Sister, your hijab is more devastating to the enemy than the shedding of my blood." This rhetoric was frequently accompanied by state propaganda that depicted the ideal revolutionary woman as a fierce, veiled militant carrying a gun, reimagining women as a desexualized, powerful warrior guarding the nation and its religion (Sedghi 2009, 209-210). This dynamic aligns with the prediction that the regime will frame unveiled women as traitors or imperialists in an attempt to reinforce the hijab's symbolic value, implying that unveiled women are choosing the imperialist West over their revolutionary brethren. Then, on August 9, 1983, three years into the war, the regime approved the Islamic Penal Code, which included Article 102, Clause 1, which stated "Women who appear in public places and thoroughfares without observing the

Islamic hijab shall be sentenced to imprisonment from ten days to two months” along the potential punishment of 74 lashes for hijab violations (Sedghi 2009, 201; Sotoudeh 2023, 17).

Within a four-month period, the regime had utilized the hijab to signal the country’s cultural and ideological boundaries, defining legitimate citizenship through women’s bodies and beginning preemptive enforcement. Within three years, it had formally institutionalized those boundaries, marking them as so important that women appearing without the physical manifestation of those boundaries were subject to criminal punishment and harassment. The dramatic and extensive implementation of the mandatory hijab following the transition from revolution to state-building lends evidence for the symbolic control sub-mechanism, as it clearly demonstrates the regime’s decisions to make the hijab, and in turn, women’s bodies, the visible symbol of the revolution and new Islamic Republic. By directly mapping out categories of “us” versus “them” through rhetoric surrounding the hijab, while also utilizing citizen enforcement to project an image of “good” women who prioritized the hijab, and “bad” women who functioned as tools of the Shah’s agenda, the Islamic Republic clearly and visibly defined the boundaries of the nation and proper citizenship. Critically, this thesis argues that this period is a critical juncture in Iranian history, where, because the hijab was clearly utilized as the defining symbol between revolutionary ideals and Western cultural imposition, the regime locked itself into ensuring its enforcement, as switching to a different symbol could produce confusion, weakening the symbolic weight of the hijab in cultural reproduction. In this way, the early institutionalization of the hijab as a symbol created a form of path dependency, where the regime became increasingly reliant on the hijab as a stable and recognizable symbol of its ideological identity.

Epoch 2: Post Iran-Iraq War (1989 to 1997):

The aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war brought the beginning of the reconstruction era under the newly appointed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and was characterized by a relative decline in the revolutionary fervor that had dominated the country in the previous decade (Golkar 2015, 77). This era of hijab enforcement underwent a complex evolution characterized by a continuous tug-of-war between the state, its newly defined boundaries, and women. In the early post-war years, Khamenei warned that the country was facing a “cultural invasion” from the West, which,

...according to Khamenei, was the penetration of aspects of Western culture, like liberalism, into Islamic societies with the aim of destroying Islamic values and culture. For him, the war was not finished. Instead, its status had changed from a hot war between Iran and Iraq to a cold one between Iran and the West. (77)

While Khamenei’s perceptions were profoundly shaped by Khomeini’s framing of the Iran-Iraq war as an imperial conspiracy conducted by Washington and reactionary Arab leaders designed to crush the newly formed Islamic Republic, he concluded that Western hostility—whether manifested through the war or subsequent diplomatic pressure—was not a reaction to Iran’s geopolitical behavior, but a response to its “uncompromising embrace of an Islamist ideology” (Takeyh 2009, 163). In response, he specifically ordered the Basij to combat this threat through upholding Islamic ethics and norms throughout society, providing them with the legal authority to conduct arrests alongside regular police through the Judicial Support for the Basij Act in 1992 (Golkar 2015, 77-78). The Basij then organized its active members into local “Hezbollah cells” designed to enforce dress codes, each acting as the designated enforcers for individual neighborhoods (78). Through this increased authority, the regime increasingly utilized the Zaynab Sisters and the Basij’s newly expanded authority to patrol public spaces to intimidate, scold, and arrest women deemed improperly dressed (Sedghi 2009, 216). The institutionalization

of the Basij's judicial authority aligns with predictions that hijab enforcement will become more aggressive after crisis periods, a dynamic that proves particularly potent given that the revolutionary fervor was fizzling out in the period after the war.

However, as Khamenei launched his offensive against this new war, the primary symbol of the regime became increasingly unstable. Despite the state's efforts, the post-war period saw women increasingly testing the boundaries of the dress code, engaging in a "battle of the hairlines," pushing their scarves further back to reveal their hair and swapping the dark, all-encompassing chadour for shorter, brightly colored coats and makeup (Esfandiari 1997, 49). While the authorities periodically launched fierce crackdowns to reassert control, such as deploying young male vigilantes tasked with stopping cars at crossroads to "haul away 'improperly' dressed women," women remained steadfast (49). Critically, these small acts of defiance didn't simply push the boundaries of the religion; they pushed the hard boundaries the regime used to define the nation's Islamic ideology—a critical function necessary for the Ayatollah's claims of a cultural invasion. As such, women presenting themselves as anything less than the Islamic ideal blurred the line between Iran and the West, leaving Khamenei with a critical question: if this blurring was accepted, how could the regime reliably and visibly identify itself against Western corruption? Consequently, this dynamic presents an explanation for why the Iranian regime continued to delegate resources to enforcing women's dress, even in the midst of a bitter armed conflict.

Epochs 3 and 4: The Reformist Era (1997-2005) and Subsequent Crackdowns (2009-2017):

Epoch 3 is a particularly critical time for the regime's battle to ensure the hijab remained a potent symbol of the nation, as this period resulted in a significant relaxation of hijab

enforcement under the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami, reflecting the administration's broader push for civil society, political tolerance, and cultural openness (Tazmini 2009, 66). The previous patterns of enforcement of dress codes in public spaces and government offices sharply declined, with encounters with the gender police dramatically decreasing between 2002 and 2005, and authorities reading private parties far less frequently than in previous decades (Sedghi 2009, 216; Tazmini 2009, 66). The reformist leniency also translated into institutional changes, as the Reformist-dominated Sixth Parliament managed to formally reduce the severity of hijab regulations for children and high school students, allowing them to wear more colorful uniforms and scarves to school (Afary 2009, 329). Additionally, by 2002, many young women in Tehran were appearing in public and private offices wearing knee-high, light-colored, tightly fitting tunics over slim pants, paired with matching striped or vibrant scarves (Sedghi 2009, 213). This change was highly consequential for the symbolic control sub-mechanism, as it visibly overrode the symbolic nature of the hijab and chadour, compromising the potency of the hijab as a symbol of anti-imperialism.

This thesis argues that this dynamic directly led to the increased enforcement pattern observed during Epoch 4, marking the era as a desperate attempt to forcefully reclaim the regime's chosen marker of its ideology and the cultural boundaries between Iran and the West. The first marker of this comes in the fact that, for the 2005 election, the Guardian Council heavily vetted the candidate pool, disqualifying more than 1,014 aspirants and narrowing the field down to six candidates, four of which were former IRGC members and the hardliner Ahmadinejad, who was the eventual winner of the presidential race (Takeyh 2009, 230). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency represented a massive, neofundamentalist and conservative backlash against the political, social, and cultural liberalization of the Khatami era, with his

administration systematically dismantling reformist initiatives by heavily securitizing the state, crushing civil society, and enforcing strict gender and morality codes (Alimagham 2020, 49; Moghadam 2013, 175, 181-183).

Critically to the symbolic control sub-mechanism, Epoch 4 saw a dramatic and aggressive reversal of the relative cultural openness, manifesting in the 2007 “social safety plans,” which specifically targeted women deemed improperly veiled (Golkar 2015, 80). Under this plan, the morality police—a new law enforcement faction established in 2005 under the official police specifically designed for monitoring adherence to Islamic values and morals (Zeidan n.d.)—and Basij militias reinstated their aggressive patrolling of public spaces, arresting women for wearing short coats, colorful scarves, or showing too much hair (Golkar 2015, 80). Then, in 2009, the Basij became involved in a new morality initiative: the Hijab and Chastity Plan, which aimed to enforce the wearing of the hijab by arresting women for violating dress codes (80). This entailed holding special courses for female Basiji to train teachers of modesty and the hijab, and then sending them to public areas to promote the culture of hijab and function as enforcers (80). By 2011, the Basij had trained over 200,000 of these teachers, and the Women’s Society Basij Organization utilized these members to increase the regime’s ideological presence throughout society and actively prevent improperly veiled women from occupying positions in the workforce and public life (118). In the same year, the regime further expanded the Basij’s localized authority by ordering the establishment of a council for *amr be maruf va nahy az monkar* (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong) in every Basij base (81). Under these new regulations, the head of each Basij base was made directly responsible for implementing moral policing within their specific neighborhood, and was permitted to use both “peaceful and coercive methods of enforcement” (81). This pattern provides evidence for the

prediction that the hijab will be consistently enforced, as, in reaction to a period in which enforcement was lax, the regime doubled down on its enforcement mechanisms in compensation. Additionally, in 2013 when the Islamic Penal Codes were revised, Article 102, the institutionalization of the hijab mandate, was translated into the note of Article 638, meaning that, while the mandate on women's dress code remained the same, the new Article as a whole expanded to include any act deemed as "offensive" to public decency is subject to the same punishment (Islamic Republic of Iran 2013, Art. 638). This slight modification, along with Article 639, expanded the scope of those who could be prosecuted for "improper" hijab or the encouragement of immorality (Sotoudeh 2023, 18).

This constant escalation appears alongside and in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement, which saw unprecedented participation from women, providing evidence for the prediction that enforcement would increase following crisis periods in order to reassert control over women and their bodies (Ansary 2015, 183-185; Moruzzi 2025, 206). Specifically, the defining symbol of the Green Movement was Neda Agha Soltan, a twenty-six-year-old philosophy student who was shot in the chest and killed during a peaceful protest against the regime (Ansary 2015, 183). Most importantly, she was veiled at the time of her death. While it is easy to mark unveiled women as undeserving of protection due to their visible alignment against strict Islamic morals, it becomes more difficult to justify the harm of a veiled woman when that very veil is the regime's universal symbol of purity and feminine excellence. Supporting evidence for this dynamic reveals itself in the form of an article from the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) English, the official English branch of the regime's official media outlet. When Neda's name is searched, only a single article appears. It details calls by President Ahmadinejad to "...launch a comprehensive and serious investigation into the 'suspicious death' of Neda

Agha-Soltan,” because the “...circumstances surrounding the young woman’s death appear highly suspicious and suggest a pre-planned conspiracy” as “...foreign media outlets and ‘enemies of the revolution’ have exploited the tragic footage of her death to launch a propaganda campaign against the Islamic Republic” (Islamic Republic News Agency [IRNA], 2009). This demonstrates that, because Neda was veiled at the time of her death, the regime resorted to framing her death as a foreign ploy in an attempt to delegitimize both her death and her position as a veiled woman.

Epoch 5: Present Day (2017-Current):

Epoch 5 represents the culmination of the deteriorating value of the hijab as a positive symbol of regime identity, highlighting that, despite consistent reinforcement across time, the disillusionment among Iranian women has manifested in a direct and explicit rejection of the mandatory hijab. Critically, while the Islamic Republic successfully utilized the hijab as its ideological identity, women across Iran were doing the same, reinterpreting the hijab not as a symbol of freedom, but as a symbol of oppression. This can be evidenced through two items: the 2017-2018 “Girls of Revolution Street” protests and the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” Movement, both of which marked a major transition away from simply pushing the boundaries of veiling to fully removing the veil in protest against the regime. The Girls of Revolution Street was a smaller-scale protest that manifested from the actions of a single protester: Vida Movahed, who removed her hijab and waved it like a flag while standing on a visible platform (Center for Human Rights in Iran [CHRI], 2018). Photos of Movahed’s silent protest quickly spread across social media, turning her into a symbol for women who opposed the compulsory dress code. Yet, it was not only her protest, but the regime’s reaction that caused a single act of civil disobedience

to turn into a small-scale pattern of similar actions. Following the spread of Movahed's actions on social media, the thirty-one-year-old disappeared for a month, resulting in Iranians expressing concern for her on social media, trending the hashtag "Where is the Girl from Revolution St?" While news from Movahed's attorney eventually spread that she was in custody and was released on bail, the damage was already done, and soon, images spread on social media of various other women standing in the streets, veil tied to a flag in silent protest (CHRI 2018).

Yet, arguably, the full manifestation of the Girl from Revolution Street was not the flurry of images saturating social media, but instead was the largest domestic legitimacy challenge since the 2009 Green Movement: The Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) Movement. In September 2022, following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini while in the custody of the morality police, the nation erupted into protest. While her death was the immediate trigger, the ensuing uprising represented a massive rejection of the Islamic Republic's control over women's bodies, serving as a catalyst for expressing deep-seated, systemic grievances. Because of the intense, symbolic value placed on women's dress by the regime, particularly the hijab, the WLF Movement represented a breaking point in the public's tolerance for the violent policing of the symbol. Moruzzi (2025) states,

Many women publicly cut their hair and openly threw off their hejab. Ordinary people rallied to the support of young women being harassed on the street for supposedly immodest dress. Now people knew that it wasn't enough to push a vehement critic out of the bus as they had in support of Sepideh Rashno; defending women's personal bodily freedom was in fact a matter of life and death. For many women, the protests – whether by masses in the street or individual women appearing publicly with their hair intentionally uncovered—were about women's right to bodily autonomy and self-determination. (188)

Some women even burned their hijabs in the streets, marking a direct attack on the most visible symbol of the Islamic Republic (UNHRC 2024, 315, 340).

Certainly, this was not a challenge the regime could afford to avoid. The decision to utilize the hijab and women's observance of the Islamic dress code as the defining symbol of the regime, its ideology, and its very existence locked the regime into a dance where the enforcement of the hijab wasn't simply a nod to religious expectations, but a matter of regime survival. If the regime fully withdrew from enforcing the hijab, it meant that, symbolically, the regime was withdrawing from its ideological identity—an action that could present the regime itself as weak, undermining its narrative of empowerment through revolutionary ideals. For, if the hijab was no longer the marker between good and evil, revolutionary and colonist, the regime loses its primary justification for its power: its position as a defender of the moral Islamic nation from evil outsiders and Western imposition. Thus, the regime met the WLF movement with unprecedented repression. State security forces unleashed disproportionate and lethal force against predominantly peaceful protesters, bystanders, and even children, utilizing live ammunition and the deliberate targeting of vital body parts (UNHRC 2024, 2, 109, 128-129). This provides evidence for the idea that the disproportionate use of force indicates an urgent need to reclaim a highly important symbol for the regime through any means necessary. Additionally, rhetoric from IRNA highlights a similar attempt to reinstate the hijab as a cultural boundary, relying heavily on rhetoric that blames the United States, Israel, Western intelligence agencies, and “treasonous Iranians abroad” for planning and instigating and supposedly planning the unrest (IRNA 2022a). Women's removal of their hijab in protest was further delegitimized through statements from the Supreme Leader, who framed the feminist protest tactic from a third-person view. He stated, “...some people took to the streets to create insecurity... They pulled women's coverings off their heads,” which not only aids the framing of Western imposition, but strips women of their political agency by re-writing resistance as something being done to women,

rather than being done *by* women (IRNA 2022b). This follows predictions of increased regime rhetoric framing deviating and its associated social movements as foreign and dangerous.

Yet, even more critically to the symbolic control sub-mechanism is what happened in the aftermath of the WLF movement: the Hijab and Chastity Law of 2023. The Law on Protecting the Family through the Promotion of the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, more commonly known as the Hijab and Chastity Law, represents an exceptionally strong piece of evidence. The law itself is a 74-article legislative framework designed to drastically escalate the Islamic Republic's persecution of women and girls who defy mandatory veiling. Drafted by the judiciary in May of 2023, the law represents a systemic overhaul of how the state enforces its dress codes (Amnesty International, 2024). The law criminalizes strategically undefined concepts such as “nudity, indecency, unveiling, and bad dressing,” and establishes a pervasive, bureaucratic surveillance state to enforce compliance. Furthermore, it imposes draconian punishments, including exorbitant fines, flogging, travel bans, prison time, and, for activists found guilty of “collaborating with foreign media” can be subject to the death penalty (Amnesty International, 2024).

While the exploration of the escalations in exact enforcement tactics or discussions surrounding the shift from reactive to proactive repression will be reserved for the women as mobilizers explanation (Explanation 4), the most important evidence that the Hijab and Chastity law provides for the symbolic control sub-mechanism is its ability to showcase that the hijab is such a critical symbol of regime identity that, even after massive nationwide protests presented one of the biggest legitimacy challenges the nation had seen since 2009, the regime still considered the ideological and symbolic value of the hijab as more critical to regime survival than domestic unrest. The decision to double down on existing measures, overhauling current

systems to account for digital repression and surveillance, while expanding the repertoire of available punishments, provides further evidence for this reality. Furthermore, regime rhetoric regarding the WLF movement reinforces the hijab's symbolic value to the regime, as official pieces from Ayatollah Khamenei's official English archive consistently refer to the protests as foreign-orchestrated riots designed to destabilize a strong, independent Iran (IRNA 2022b; IRNA 2022a; IRNA 2023; Office of the Supreme Leader 2023). This not only mirrors previous tactics employed during Epoch 1 but also reinforces the idea that the hijab is a symbolic marker between Islamic revolutionary ideals and the West's cultural invasion. The consistency behind the justification of the hijab provides additional evidence, as it highlights that the function of the hijab has not symbolically altered to adapt to new conditions, but instead has remained a steady marker of regime ideology that was set into stone during the nation's infancy.

Conclusion:

The evidence and analysis provided within the discussion of the symbolic control sub-mechanism have revealed that the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently identified and relied upon the hijab to visibly enforce and define the boundaries of the nation. By framing adherence to Islamic dress codes through garments like the hijab or chadour as empowering mechanisms designed to release women from their Western entrapment as object, the regime presented a clear boundary, defining concepts of "us" (the nation) through the enlightenment and freedom of the veil, and by extension, Islamic principles, and "them" as malicious foreign agents designed to destroy the Islamic Republic from within. The continued enforcement and promotion of the hijab within this very framing provides additional evidence of the symbol's impotence, as it transcends all five epochs without major modification to the core identity of the symbol.

Additionally, by responding to periods of cultural openness during the reformist era with intensive periods of backlash, the country's past provides critical evidence that the symbolic function of the hijab is not contingent on social acceptance, but rather, on its utility to the regime as a visible marker of ideological authority.

More importantly, the persistence of this enforcement across radically different political and social contexts—from revolutionary consolidation, to post-war reconstruction, to the reformist opening, and finally to existential crises—demonstrates that the hijab functions as more than a policy preference or religious obligation. Instead, it operates as a foundational pillar of regime identity, through which the state continuously reasserts its authority and defines the boundaries of belonging. Even when enforcement risks provoking widespread unrest, as seen during the Women, Life, Freedom movement, the regime's decision to escalate rather than retreat underscores the non-negotiable nature of the symbol. Taken together, these patterns strongly support the symbolic control sub-mechanism, illustrating that the regulation of women's dress in Iran is not simply a matter of social control or religious mandates, but a central mechanism through which the regime constructs, maintains, and defends its ideological identity.

5.2 - Explanation 2B: The Patriarchal Bargain

While the symbolic control sub-mechanism demonstrates how the regime constructs symbolic boundaries through women's bodies, the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism focuses on how these boundaries are embedded within a system of power and compensation. Specifically, this mechanism predicts that regimes will institutionalize gender hierarchies to secure male loyalty through a patriarchal bargain, while simultaneously positioning the state as a paternal authority in exchange for obedience. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this

dynamic is evident in the legal codification of gender inequality, the reinforcement of male authority within the household, and the consistent use of paternalistic rhetoric to justify restrictions on women.

Epoch 1: Foundational Consolidation (1979-1989):

One of the major pieces of evidence for the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism within the context of Epoch 1 is held within the country's new Constitution, which was ratified on December 3, 1979, through a popular vote in which 99% of participating voters approved of the new Constitution (Abrahamian 2008, 168-169). Because the patriarchal bargain asserts that women's role is that of a mother and homemaker, while also appointing men, and by extension, the regime, as guardians or protectors, various sections of the Constitution provide evidence of how the bargain was institutionalized. Firstly, within the Preamble, the regime explicitly redefined its ideal conception of womanhood, declaring that women must be delivered from modern objectification to reclaim the precious function of motherhood and rearing ideologically committed citizens (Sadeghi 2023, 63-64). In specific, it states,

The family is the primal unit of society and the essential center for the growth and grandeur of men. Compatibility in respect to beliefs and ideals is the fundamental principle in establishing a family, that is the essential ground for the course of humanity's growth and development. It is among the responsibilities of the Islamic Republic to provide the conditions for attaining this goal. In accordance with this view of the family unit, women are emancipated from the state of being an "object" or a "tool" in the service of disseminating consumerism and exploitation, while reclaiming the crucial and revered responsibility of motherhood and raising ideological vanguards. Women shall walk alongside men in the active arenas of existence. As a result, women will be the recipients of a more critical responsibility and enjoy a more exalted and prized estimation in view of Islam. (Iran Constitution 1979, pmb1.)

This framing carries both the markers of Roggeband and Krizan's (2024) gender-washing and Jackman's (1994) benevolent paternalism; by utilizing terms like "emancipated" alongside

“exalted,” the regime frames women’s preemptive confinement to motherhood not as autocratic overreach, but as a form of liberation designed to save an exploited demographic (9-11; 403-405). This creates a dynamic of the logic of masculinist protection, where men expect to be rewarded for bravely protecting or liberating “womenandchildren.” Simultaneously, by utilizing sentences like “Women shall walk alongside men in the active arenas of existence,” right alongside the glamorization of limiting women’s role to that of mothers, the Preamble co-opts feminist language in an attempt to redefine what equality and liberation look like, a hallmark of Çavdar and Yaşar’s (2026) metric of discursive (de)legitimization of gender policy (12). Through institutionalizing women’s confinement to the domestic sphere, it inherently grants men the ability to monopolize the public economic and political arenas, codifying men’s patriarchal dividend.

In addition to the Preamble, Article 21 of the Constitution highlights how the dual patriarchal bargain is embedded within the country’s legal documents, institutionalizing the state’s involvement in the private sphere in the name of protecting women, mirroring the language of the patriarchal bargain by stating,

The government must secure the rights of women in all respects, according to the Islamic criteria. The government must do the following: 1. create an apt environment for the growth of woman’s personality and restore her material and spiritual rights; 2. protect the mothers, especially during the child-bearing and child-rearing periods, and protect children without guardians; 3. create competent courts to protect the integrity and subsistence of the family; 4. establish a special insurance for widows, elderly women, and women who are without guardians; 5. bestow the custody of children to qualified mothers, whenever in the interests of the children, and in the absence of a legal guardian. (Iran Constitution 1979, art. 21)

In this way, the state justifies extensive involvement and regulation of the public and private spheres through benevolent language that frames autocratic overreach as paternalistic protection of women, providing direct evidence of the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism. Here,

women are technically guaranteed their rights, but only if those rights “conform to the dictates of the patriarchal religious establishment” (Sadeghi 2023, 63). Consequently, the state’s Constitution directly and explicitly codified the patriarchal bargain into reality, dipping it in fatherly language and intentional framing of “equality.” In this way, the state mirrors the patriarchal household, positioning itself as a paternal authority responsible for regulating and protecting the nation.

However, this isn’t the only institutionalization of women’s subordination to men, as the country’s Penal Code further codifies this dynamic. For matters of blood money (financial compensation in the occurrence of a homicide), Article 300 asserts that the blood money paid for the murder of a Muslim woman is half the amount paid for a murdered Muslim man (Khorasani 2010, 137-138). This dynamic applies to murders of pregnant women, where the blood money paid for her life is half that of her male fetus, along with crossing over into injuries like car accidents, where the damages awarded to women are legally capped at half of those provided to the man (120). In matters involving legal testimony, the penal code explicitly state through various articles that a woman’s testimony in court carries half the legal weight of a man’s, and in certain criminal cases (sodomy, prostitution, or alcohol consumption) women are entirely barred from testifying alone, with their testimony only accepted if a certain number of “righteous men” also testify (Khorasani 2010, 121; Sedghi 2009, 207). Beyond codifying the patriarchal bargain, this dynamic provides evidence through benevolent paternalism, as this particular section of the code assumes that a woman could not possibly be mature enough or cognizant enough to provide valuable legal testimony.

The Penal Code also sets a drastically lower age of criminal responsibility for girls, at age 8, than for boys, at age 14 (Khorasani 2010, 119). This creates an irreconcilable dynamic where,

on one hand, women are unable to provide salient testimony compared to men, but are simultaneously considered more responsible than their male counterparts. This gives men both grace under the eyes of the law, while also providing a distinct advantage when participating in it. Furthermore, the Penal Code also provides significant legal advantages and leniency to men who murder female relatives in the name of “honor,” granting men the legal permission to murder their wives in the case of willing adultery, along with exempting fathers and paternal grandfathers who murder their children from the death penalty, often resulting in sentences of only a few years in prison (121, 138). This institutionalizes the absolute domination of men over women in the home, granting him authority to go as far as to kill her if she brings “dishonour” to the family, providing robust evidence for the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism. Thus, by granting men legal authority within both the household and the legal system, the regime provides a compensatory benefit, often called the patriarchal dividend, that helps secure male loyalty despite broader autocratic subordination.

Epoch 2: Post Iran-Iraq War (1989 to 1997):

As a direct result of the heavy frontloading of institutionalization during Epoch 1, the post-war period focused largely on further reinforcing the patriarchal bargain rather than restructuring it. During this period, the state relied heavily on the family unit to anchor its gender hierarchy, maintaining what scholars describe as “private patriarchy” (the first part of the patriarchal bargain) to uphold the public gender regime. Article 1105 of the Civil Code explicitly designates the husband as the exclusive “head of the family,” which intertwines a woman’s financial survival with her total obedience to her husband (UNHRC 2024, 70). This dynamic was further reinforced through Article 1108, which stipulates that, while a husband is legally required

ot provide maintenance (*nafaqeh*), covering food, clothing, and shelter, the wife will lose that right if she refuses to fulfill her wifely duties (*tamkin*) (Afary 2009, 284). This dynamic directly institutionalized the patriarchal bargain within the context of a post-war economy, where Iranian women were navigating a world where, during the war, they had to fill in their husband's roles in the labor market to sustain the war effort. Enforcement of this article then becomes particularly critical if a regime is seeking to force women to return to the home, forfeiting their newly acquired economic freedom in exchange for a "safer" claim to economic stability. Additionally, Article 1117 of the Civil Code incorporates items that allow a husband to ban his wife from "any technical profession that conflicts with family life or her character," allowing men even more room to reclaim the patriarchal dividend that they temporarily lost during the war (Ansary 2015, 100).

A husband's ability to keep his wife out of the workforce through *nafaqeh* is further reinforced by both the Constitutional framing of women's glorification as mothers and the economic structures of the state. Because Iran is a rentier state, the economic structure of the state and its clientele network naturally limited widespread female economic participation, and when women did enter the workforce, the state enforced occupational segregation (Kian 2023, 131). This dynamic meant that women were largely clustered in traditionally "feminine" sectors like education and healthcare, where gender segregation policies could be enforced (Kian 2023, 195). Kian argues that these measures reflect the government's attempts to create a solution for male unemployment, especially among young men aged fifteen to twenty-nine, who were experiencing a crisis of traditional masculinity aggravated by high unemployment rates (195-196). By structurally limiting women's participation in the workforce, the state reinforces the patriarchal bargain by prioritizing male economic dominance, a tangible measure of

increasing inequality in the market (Çavdar and Yaşar 2026, 12). Given the evidence provided, this analysis holds particularly well when explaining how gender hierarchies were utilized to sacrifice women's economic attainment and freedom for men's economic domination.

Epochs 3 and 4: The Reformist Era (1997-2005) and Subsequent Crackdowns (2009-2017):

The reformist era of Epoch 3 provided the most direct challenge to the patriarchal bargain the country had seen up until that point. In response to an opening in civil society as a result of President Khatami's policies, educated women began creatively subverting the patriarchal bargain through various methods. A critical part of this subversion was women's unprecedented pursuit of higher education, which delayed marriage, increased their independence, and fundamentally altered their social expectations (Moghadam 2013, 179). In the lead-up to the Khatami presidency, the removal of academic quotas in the early 1990s, female enrollment surged, and by 1999, the percentage of female university students surpassed that of men for the first time, and by 2002, women were dominating admissions even in traditionally male-centric fields like agriculture, veterinary sciences, and engineering (179-180). This demographic shift translated directly into massive political participation; women constituted roughly 40 percent of the electorate that voted for Khatami in 1997, establishing themselves as a founding force of Iran's new civil society. Given the opportunity to expand their influence during the reformist era, women aggressively claimed space in both local and national elections (Kian 2023, 207), most notably pushing to raise the age of marriage for girls to thirteen, securing the right for single women to pursue graduate studies abroad on state scholarships, and advocated for greater rights in divorce and child custody (Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016, 169). By directly entering into the educational sphere and legislative process, women bypassed the patriarchal bargain, claiming

agency for themselves and firmly situating themselves as a part of the political sphere.

Consequently, this dynamic threatened the patriarchal bargain, which requires that men have full control over the political and economic spheres, creating a new reality that in turn threatened the patriarchal bargain between the state and its citizens.

While not a crisis for women, an emerging reality defined by women's active political participation and agency was a fundamental crisis for the patriarchal bargain, and as such, in an effort to recontain women, Epoch 4 is characterized by evidence supporting the reinstatement of the patriarchal bargain. During the Ahmadinejad presidency, the government officially declared that a woman's most important duty was raising the next generation, and to combat declining fertility rates caused by higher education and delayed marriage, the administration dismantled the country's highly successful family planning program (Ansary 2015, 182; Moghadam 2013, 182). The budget for population control initiatives was eliminated, and in its place stood new financial incentives to encourage families to have more children (Ansary 2015, 182; Moghadam 2013, 181-182). Ahmadinejad even recommended part-time work rather than full-time employment for women during this period, indicating a frantic push to force women back into the home (Afary 2009, 346).

In addition, the 2007 Family Protection Bill was introduced to directly attack the tools women had utilized to subvert the patriarchal bargain. During the reformist era, educated women began demanding exorbitant sums for their *mehrieh* (a traditional nuptial gift or dower payable by the groom), repurposing this financial obligation into a modern bargaining chip where the threat of claiming this massive, legally enforceable debt deterred husbands from unilaterally seeking a divorce, committing domestic abuse, or taking a second wife (Moghadam 2013, 198). Thus, to gain leverage in the context of the patriarchal bargain—where women had no

leverage—women would use the threat of litigating their *mehrieh* to force their husbands to grant a divorce in cases of intolerable marriages or adultery (198-199). The Family Protection Bill, however, directly attacked women’s ability to leverage their *mehrieh* by easing the restrictions on polygamy, removing requirements to register temporary marriages, and imposing taxes on “excessive” *mehrieh* to destroy the financial leverage women had secured for themselves (199). Given the strong, reactionary evidence surrounding the Ahmadinejad era, this thesis argues that the patriarchal bargain is particularly critical to the Islamic Republic, as the moment that men’s patriarchal dividend became threatened by the increased autonomy of women, the regime directly responded with measures designed to limit women’s autonomy, financial leverage, and economic freedoms. This paints the subsequent backlash as a reflection of the regime’s effort to reinstate the patriarchal bargain in the face of perceived erosion, suggesting that the patriarchal bargain is not merely a social arrangement, but a core mechanism of regime stability whose disruption necessitates immediate corrective action.

Epoch 5: Present Day (2017-Current):

This brings the analysis to Epoch 5, which, as established through the examination of the symbolic control sub-mechanism, is defined by the massive Women, Life, Freedom movement. However, unlike the reformist era, where women strategically navigated and subverted the patriarchal bargain through items like the weaponization of traditional marriage customs like the *mehrieh*, the WLF movement represented a fundamental, structural rejection of the bargain itself. Instead of trading submissiveness and modesty for protection and respectability, women and their allies demanded full bodily autonomy and the establishment of a new, egalitarian social contract. This uprising saw women acting as the public faces of resistance by cutting their hair

and intentionally throwing off and burning their mandatory headscarves. By targeting the most visible symbols of state-sponsored femininity and control, these acts of civil disobedience were a direct refusal to participate in the patriarchal script, with women demonstrating that they would no longer trade their self-determination and bodily autonomy for the regime's conditional protection (Moruzzi 2025, 188; UNHRC 2024, 315).

Furthermore, the WLF movement shattered men's position as the dominant protectors and enforcers of female behavior within the patriarchal bargain, as men and boys transcended traditional gender divides by protesting alongside women, chanting the same slogans in support of women's rights (UNHRC 2024, 104). The movement also redefined how citizens related to each other in public spaces, moving away from orthodox, family-bound hierarchies toward horizontal democratic solidarity. A powerful example of this is the phenomenon of protesters offering anonymous "free hugs" in the streets, expanding the model of kinship to a societal level (Moruzzi 2025, 225-226). They established "horizontal relations of equality, mutuality, and shared obligation," effectively replacing the state's orthodox, patriarchal ideology with a network of egalitarian connections based on intentional generosity and shared recognition (225-226). This counter dynamic lends absolutely critical evidence for the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism, as the main reason the state endorses a patriarchal bargain between men and women is to be able to extract and replicate that dynamic on the national level. However, if men pull out of their assigned roles, this threatens the entire structure of the dual patriarchal bargain, directly putting the regime's derived benefits at risk. This, along with women's refusal to submit in the home or to the bargain as a whole, produced an existential crisis for the regime, placing the foundations of its social power and autocratic reproduction at risk. The aggressive backlash policies outlined in the symbolic control sub-mechanism provide additional evidence,

highlighting unrestrained and disproportionate violence in combination with aggressive overhauls of enforcement tactics in a last-ditch attempt to force the whole of society back into the patriarchal bargain. The question now is whether an awakened society will ever truly be willing to go back to that reality.

Conclusion:

Across all epochs, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently relied on the institutionalization and reinforcement of gender hierarchies to stabilize its political authority through a patriarchal bargain. From the early constitutional codification of women's domestic roles and legal subordination, to the post-war reinforcement of male authority within the household, and finally to the aggressive backlash against women's autonomy during periods of reform and crisis, the regime has repeatedly acted to preserve a system in which male loyalty is secured through gendered privilege. Crucially, moments in which women challenged or bypassed this structure—whether through education, economic participation, or mass protest—were met with targeted policies designed to reassert male dominance and recontain women within the domestic sphere. The Women, Life, Freedom movement represents the most direct rupture of this system, exposing the fragility of a regime that depends on the reproduction of hierarchical gender relations for its survival. Taken together, these patterns strongly support the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism, demonstrating that gender inequality in Iran is not incidental, but a foundational mechanism through which the regime distributes power, secures loyalty, and reproduces authoritarian rule.

5.3 - Explanation 4: Women as High-Impact Mobilizers

The women as mobilizers explanation argues that regimes target women because they are high-impact mobilizers who increase the likelihood that dissent becomes large-scale, legitimate, and successful. As a result, regimes respond to women's participation in social movements through a combination of co-optation, selective repression, and the escalation of existing gender-based controls. In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this mechanism is particularly visible across multiple protest cycles, where women's participation consistently coincides with intensified repression, the closure of autonomous civil society, and the expansion of gender enforcement policies.

Epoch 1: Foundational Consolidation (1979-1989):

During the 1979 revolution, women from diverse backgrounds, ranging from secular professionals without headscarves to traditional women wearing the chadour, marched shoulder-to-shoulder to overthrow the monarchy—a feat praised by even Ayatollah Khomeini himself (Karimi 2018, 86; Khomeini 2008, 6:262). However, in March of 1979, upon the Supreme Leader's mandate that all women in government buildings adorn the mandatory hijab, this coalition fractured, and Iranian women came face to face with the reality that Khomeini's promise of men and women being equal in the new republic was at risk of becoming nothing more than a dream (Khomeini 1981, 240). On March 8, 1979, International Women's Day, tens of thousands of women poured into the streets of Tehran, staging sit-ins and chanting "At the Dawn of Freedom, There Is No Freedom (Afary 2009, 273). Secular and leftist women's groups, such as the National Union of Women, organized protests and formed committees to fight the

Islamization of the country's family laws and sex segregation (250-251). The five-day demonstrations even drew the support of some leftist men, who formed protective cordons around the women, physically fighting off armed attackers from pro-regime vigilante groups (273).

Initially, the regime retreated, claiming that the hijab decree was merely a "recommendation," and that women had misunderstood the intentions of Khomeini (Afary 2009, 273). However, this was but a temporary, tactical concession: once the regime consolidated power, it launched a violent counter-offensive (234). Then, as news of the women's protests spread, club-wielding vigilantes and thugs quickly mobilized to attack and brutally beat the protesters, creating an additional layer of violence (Esfandiari 1997, 9-20). Finally, noting these vigilantes and doing nothing to stop them, the regime then mobilized conservative, chadour-clad women in state-sponsored counter-demonstrations to denounce the secular protesters as "prostitutes" and "Western dolls" (Afary 2009, 274; Sedghi 2009, 205). Critically, unlike the women's rights protests that had to fend off brutal vigilante violence, this counter-demonstration enjoyed the full logistical and political support of the new regime (Afary 2009, 274). The state provided free transportation for the participants and ensured they experienced complete freedom from any street harassment, highlighting the stark contrast in how the government treated its traditionalist base versus its secular critics.

In the context of the women as mobilizers explanation, where evidence is tracked based on regime response to women's mobilization and the consequential escalation or alterations of those responses, Epoch 1 marks the groundwork for all future epochs. As evidenced by careful protest coordination, the Iranian regime's response is reactionary but relatively calm in comparison to future protest responses. Enjoying broad revolutionary and anti-imperialist

support in the direct aftermath of the revolution, co-optation of the movement through the execution of another, larger protest movement presented the regime with an easy way to present those at the International Women's Day protests as a small, relatively insignificant dissatisfied portion of the population still clinging to Pahlavi era "freedoms." Here, the women hadn't acted as high-intensity mobilizers; instead, the movement to protest against the new hijab mandate fractured the coalition built during the revolutionary period, marking women engaged in protest as a relatively isolated faction. Additionally, the regime didn't need to utilize selective repression, as vigilante groups fulfilled that function for them. As a result, the regime response reflects this dynamic, utilizing simple co-optation of the protest and the outsourcing of violence to "seal the deal."

Epoch 2: Post Iran-Iraq War (1989 to 1997):

The evidence provided in Epoch 2 aids in reinforcing the expectations of the women as mobilizers explanation by highlighting that, when a regime does not recognize women as a mobilization threat, it will not take great measures to engage in co-optation, selective repression, or the doubling down of existing measures targeting gender. This dynamic crafts a sort of "null" period in which later epochs provide positive evidence of the expected outcomes of this explanation.

In the period following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Cultural Revolution, in combination with regime paranoia as a result of the state's "clandestine struggle, political betrayals...and tactical bargains" (Takeyh 2009, 36) drove the regime to establish a pervasive atmosphere of terror, surveillance, and institutionalized repression. The IRGC and Basij functioned as the "eyes and ears" of the state, aggressively spying on the domestic population

(Afary 2009, 266). This fear penetrated deep into private life, where citizens lived in constant fear that an unfriendly neighbor or revolutionary guard would inform the authorities if they engaged in private, banned activities like listening to music or hosting parties (Esfandiari 1997, 4). This was accompanied by continued state elimination of dissent through covert means, arresting dissidents on fabricated espionage charges and forcing them to deliver televised “confessions”—or worse (Afary 2009, 322). Vigilantism and street-level harassment also remained intact during this era (266).

Despite the extreme repression of the epoch, the period between 1989 and 1997 was not entirely devoid of unrest: rather than formal, politically organized pro-democracy movements, this era was characterized by spontaneous, large-scale urban riots and social protests (Golkar 2026, 1). The most prominent of these occurred between 1992 and 1994, when, primarily triggered by severe postwar economic austerity measures in combination with outbreaks of ethnic unrest, various uprisings took place (Tazmini 2009, 42). While minor criticism of the state was occasionally tolerated, these larger demonstrations were met with severe and violent repression—not because of the fear of women’s participation increasing the success of the movement, but out of sheer paranoia by the regime (Takeyh 2009, 36). However, critical to the development of the state’s repertoire of repression tactics, during the revolt in the city of Qazvin, local IRGC members refused to suppress the unrest because they felt too personally and ethnically connected to the local protesters, forcing the regime to summon Basij battalions from Tehran to Qazvin (Golkar 2015, 94-95). Recognizing the potential threat that spontaneous urban riots posed to the survival of the regime, the state decided to aggressively upgrade its security apparatus to prepare for future unrest (Golkar 2026, 1). This included the creation of specialized IRGC headquarters designed specifically to manage domestic rebellions, the expansion of

anti-riot battalions, and the institutionalization of specialized training courses for members of the Basij, focusing specifically on “urban control” (Golkar 2015, 19, 95; Golkar 2026, 1).

However, it is critical to note that women did not remain still during this period, even if their presence in the epoch’s protests was less visible. As a direct result of the state’s severe repression rendering coordinated street protests largely impossible, this era saw the birth of “Islamic Feminism,” wherein religious and secular women began to subtly collaborate (Ghoreishi 2021, 64; Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2026, 177). Activists founded independent magazines, notably *Zanan* (Women) in 1992, and through these publications women challenged the patriarchal status quo by publishing feminist readings of the Quran, demonstrating that male supremacy stemmed from clerical interpretation rather than divine law (Ansary 2015, 158). Because direct physical confrontation in the streets was replaced by a “war of ideas,” women organized through the press to build a discourse of rights, while the regime replaced vigilante street violence with systemic, bureaucratic enforcement of its gender codes (Ghoreishi 2021, 64). Thus, Epoch 2 represents another period in which, while the coercive apparatus was evolving, it was not due to the mass mobilization of women. However, this is not to argue that early adaptations by the coercive apparatus are not important—instead, it highlights a dynamic where women were not yet identified as high-impact mobilizers, but, while the regime focused on urban riots, women were slowly building the foundations of women’s coalitions. Thus, Epoch 2 can be understood as a “simmering” period where the regime was not yet aware of the brewing dynamics that would later explode in future epochs.

Epochs 3 and 4: The Reformist Era (1997-2005) and Subsequent Crackdowns (2009-2017):

Epochs 3 and 4 function to provide evidence towards the women as mobilizers explanation by temporally highlighting how the Iranian regime began to become aware of women's high capacity for mobilization through the One Million Signatures Campaign, and from there, preemptively moved to constrain their political participation—even if that containment proved fruitless.

The political openings during the reformist era were critical for the formation of women's political coalitions, as women capitalized on a dramatic opening in civil society and formal political participation. During this period, women formed over 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and established advocacy networks like the “Women's Thought Consensus,” where diverse women's organizations would organize “protest gatherings” to counter various patriarchal narratives or clichés (Ghoreishi 2021, 108-111). While women were organizing on the ground, women were also engaging with the state's electoral institutions, with the thirteen female deputies of the Sixth Majlis forming a powerful women's caucus to act as a “counterpublic” to push for progressive legislation, such as raising the marriage age for girls, reforming child custody, and advocating for Iran to join the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Ghoreishi 2021, 139-140; Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016, 169).

The regime's response to this mobilization was bifurcated; the reformist executive branch facilitated women's organizing by creating the Center for Women's Participation and funding women's NGOs, while the unelected conservative clerical establishment vehemently fought back (Ansary 2015, 137). The Guardian Council vetoed nearly all progressive gender legislation

passed by the parliament, deeming it un-Islamic, while the conservative judiciary ultimately cracked down on the flourishing civil society, arresting prominent feminists and shutting down publications after the 2000 Berlin Conference (Moghadam 2013, 181; Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016, 183). As such, the regime revealed a deep fracture, with the state's elected officials attempting to appease women while the deep state utilized its absolute veto power and judicial apparatus to thwart systemic legal equality. This fracture reveals that, during this period of open and active women's participation in civil society, the regime began to perceive women as particularly potent mobilizers—a dynamic evidenced by both selective repression via undermining implementation through vetoing popular reforms from the hardliners, and visible concessions from the reformists in an attempt to remain in power. Thus, while the regime didn't quite have hard proof of the extent of women's mobilization, the organizational cooperation and cohesion among women during this period projected an image of a currently dormant threat multiplier simply waiting to be activated.

In 2006, the regime received a bitter taste of what this assemblage of women's coalitions might look like through the One Million Signatures Campaign. The campaign emerged following a peaceful women's rights gathering at Haft-Tir Square in Tehran, which was violently dispersed by state security forces under President Ahmadinejad (Khorasani 2010, 5). In the aftermath, activists held extensive meetings to synchronize their demands and officially launched the grassroots campaign on August 27, 2006 (5). Although the campaign was relatively short-lived, spanning from 2006 to 2009, it represented an unprecedented display of solidarity, successfully bridging deeply entrenched societal, ideological, and geographic divides that had historically fractured the Iranian women's movement (Moghadam 2013, 245). Critically, rather than getting tied down in divisive, abstract ideological debates, the campaign united women by focusing

strictly on concrete, shared grievances, rallying around the specific practical goal of reforming discriminatory laws that caused tangible suffering in women's daily lives (Khorasani 2010, 23, 39; Moghadam 2013, 205). Even though severe state repression, including harassment, travel bans, and imprisonment of dozens of its activists, the campaign achieved concrete legislative victories through amending inheritance laws and forcing the parliament to shelve Articles 23 and 25 of Ahmadinejad's Family Protection Bill (Afary 2009, 371-372; Ansary 2015, 186-187). Critically, through a focus on a grassroots, face-to-face methodology, women acted as critical bridge leaders, speaking directly with housewives, shopkeepers, and working-class women to break down class barriers and empower ordinary citizens to participate in democratic action (Khorasani 2010, 42).

Then, in the wake of the Ahmadinejad presidency and the closure of civil society, this threat multiplier erupted. During the 2009 Green Movement, women transitioned from being passive constituents to serving as the high-impact, driving force of the uprising, fundamentally reshaping the political landscape. The critical methods of connection formed through the One Million Signatures Campaign were rapidly applied to the political context, as women expanded the scope of the Green Movement by linking women's liberation directly to broader democratic demands (Khorasani 2010, 91-92). The founders of the coalition intentionally invited diverse groups into their ranks, arguing that a full "buy-in" into the wider civic agenda of free elections, freedom of speech, and civil rights for all was not a distraction from women's rights, but a massive source of strength (92). Furthermore, women could be seen as force multipliers at the forefront of demonstrations, as nearly half of all participants in the mass demonstrations were women (Alimagham 2020, 69-70). Women also played a critical role in spreading the word about nonviolent methods to counter official state violence, drawing from previous lessons regarding

experiences where violent reactions to military crackdowns produced only paralyzing backlash (Khorasani 2010, 95).

As a direct result of women's mobilization, adding numerical strength and ideological cohesion to a massive social movement, the regime decided to continue with its previous response: repression. However, the repression utilized during the 2009 Green Movement represented a proportionate shift to overwhelming violence and a strategic shift away from the use of police to quell the protests to the utilization of the newly equipped IRGC and Basij (a product of Epoch 2). The regime initially deployed riot police who utilized shields and tear gas, but when this proved inefficient, Basiji militiamen on motorcycles were unleashed, beating protesters with iron rods, bats, and clubs, as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei actively encouraged the violence (Golkar 2015, 100; Ostovar 2016, 183). As the protests continued to grow, the Supreme National Security Council officially authorized the IRGC to step in and assume command of the broader counter-protest campaign, elevating the IRGC's involvement in domestic politics to unprecedented heights and effectively turning the country into a "violent garrison state" (Kamrava 2023, 30). Furthermore, as social media increasingly manifested as a tool of protest, the regime, although ill-adapted to digital repression due to a lack of familiarity with the threat, reacted through the ad hoc shutting down of the internet and SMS messaging, marking the birth of the regime's focus on digital tactics (UNHRC 2024, 25).

Faced with the sheer volume and reach of the 2009 Green Movement, the regime was forced to reckon with a severe and brutal wake-up call and decided to upgrade its security apparatus even further to insulate itself from further large-scale rebellions. In direct response to the 2009 uprisings, the IRGC created its own dedicated intelligence branch, the IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGCIO), to run parallel to the traditional Ministry of Intelligence

(Golkar 2026, 1). Furthermore, to combat online organizing, the regime established cyber battalions within the Basij, creating specialized forces designed to monitor and thwart online organizing (Golkar 2015, 73). Furthermore, the national police shifted its strategy away from chaotic street brawling to specialized crowd control, establishing hundreds of new patrol units and creating a dedicated female anti-riot unit (Kamrava 2023, 164).

In efforts to combat the root of the expansive nature of the 2009 Green Movement, the regime began intensively prioritizing the closure and repression of civil society once the dust of the uprising began to settle. Authorities increasingly denied official registration to independent NGOs, blocked their activities, and cut off their access to funding, directly impacting scores of existing NGOs belonging to students, professionals, and critically, women's rights advocates (UNHRC 2024, 97). Activists who attempted to organize at the grassroots level—such as members of the One Million Signatures Campaign—were subjected to severe state harassment, travel bans, interrogations, and imprisonment on national security charges (Khorasani 2010, 155; UNHRC 2024, 98). In tandem with the selective closure of civil society was the attempted co-optation of these very groups through state-sponsored NGOs. The Women's Society Basij Organization (WSBO) was an explicit, women-aimed example: originally the female branch of the Basij, the group underwent an organizational transformation designed to expand its socio-cultural footprint and allow the Iranian government to deceptively portray the paramilitary group to the international community as a simple “NGO” working on women's issues (Golkar 2015, 111). The regime even attempted to co-opt the One Million Signatures Campaign, creating a rival “Four and a Half Million Signatures Campaign” (110). This state-backed campaign mirrored that of the independent movement, but was designed to promote the mandatory hijab,

defend conservative Islamic practices, and accuse secular women's rights advocates of working for Western powers (110-111).

As such, the 2009 Green Movement and Epoch 4 presented the regime with an explosive reckoning: their previous underestimation of the power of women's autonomous organizing and role as high-impact mobilizers had resulted in the regime adopting a largely reactive response. Unprepared for the sheer volume of the uprising, running from grassroots organizing to online activism, left the regime largely scrambling to catch up. Instead of preemptively containing the movement, it was forced to utilize high-intensity repression as the most prominent tactic to quell dissent, transitioning into co-optation and the hardening of existing measures only after the dust had settled. However, this reckoning proved a powerful awakening, as the evidence demonstrated above highlights the regime's gradual shift to a more preemptive response.

Epoch 5: Present Day (2017-Current):

Epoch 5 represents the culmination of a long learning curve, where, as the women as mobilizers explanation would predict, the continued failures to contain the previous mass movement resulted in a re-engagement with the methods of co-optation, selective repression, and repression expansion specified in the explanation. Through this epoch, one can mostly observe an expansion of existing programs and selective repression, as a result of a pattern of mass movements adopting rhetoric that increasingly becomes more and more hostile to the regime's existence, rather than its policies.

In the combined aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement and the periodic cycles of unrest from 2017-2018, the Islamic Republic made even more institutional moves to preemptively contain what clearly appeared to be the inevitable next wave of mass unrest (Golkar 2026, 1).

Most notably, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei manipulated the 2020 and 2021 elections to disqualify unreliable politicians and install both loyal hardliners and numerous members of the IRGC (1). The regime enhanced anti-riot drills and intensified ideological training to justify the violent suppression of future protests to its security forces, while also ordering government bureaus to build perimeter protection walls up to three meters high to physically defend against future riots (1-2).

Yet, despite these measures, the sheer scope and scale of the ensuing Women, Life, Freedom movement (WLF)—the largest domestic legitimacy challenge since the 2009 Green Movement—caught the Iranian regime off guard, taking them months to forcibly restore order. In particular, the movement’s immense geographic spread to nearly 135 cities, and the unprecedented, fearless participation of the Generation Z and secondary schoolgirls came as a particular surprise, as they demonstrated how deeply and broadly the challenges to the Islamic Republic’s ideological foundations had taken root (Golkar 2026, 1-2).

Consistent with the framework of the women as mobilizers explanation, the participation of women in this movement was explosively potent in increasing its range, ideological threat, and chances of success. Not only were women the first to mobilize following the announcement of Mahsa Jina Amini’s death in custody, but they utilized radical acts of civil disobedience to place themselves at the symbolic center of the movement, marking their place as the active faces of the resistance (Moruzzi 2025, 188; UNHRC 2024, 103). The movement was also heavily characterized by the massive mobilization of young women and girls within educational institutions (UNHRC 2024, 104-105). University students catalyzed academic protests, while inside secondary schools, teenage girls defied school authorities by removing their mandatory headcoverings and defacing pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Supreme Leader Ayatollah

Khamenei (104-105). Furthermore, women seized the digital space to launch breakthrough campaigns designed to broaden the scope and reach of the movement, utilizing social media platforms like *Instagram* to mobilize dissenting voices and document the uprising (311-312). Building on a reactionary legacy to the regime's increasing digital literacy and repression, women utilized prior digital campaigns as templates for distributing videos and images of themselves protesting, cutting their hair, and walking unveiled. This not only allowed them to express their dissent publicly, but also connected and energized activists both inside and outside of Iran (312).

Most critically for the expansion of the WLF movement, women mobilized by linking their specific demands for gender equality with broader democratic aspirations and human rights, mirroring the 2009 Green Movement and effectively moving beyond feminist issues to challenge the entire theocratic and oppressive structure of the state (UNHRC 2024, 96, 103, 106). They coalesced around the slogan “*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*” (Women, Life, Freedom)—a translation of the Kurdish slogan “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*”—which paid homage to Kurdish women while serving to unite Iranians across ethnic, religious, linguistic, and class divides (Moruzzi 2025, 186n3; UNHRC 2024, 104). Furthermore, this inclusive, intersectional framing successfully mobilized men, boys, and LGBTQIA+ individuals to protest alongside them, fostering a transformative solidarity that both shifted traditional patriarchal attitudes among the youth and, once again, marked women as high-capacity mobilizers and bridge-leaders (Moruzzi 2025, 207-208; UNHRC 2024, 104-106).

While the movement ultimately succumbed to the highly violent response from the coercive apparatus, further supported by massive internet blackouts, the regime ultimately managed to restore domestic order a few months after the movement took hold. Thus, in the

aftermath of being once again caught off guard, the Iranian regime launched a massive, accelerated restructuring of its security and intelligence apparatus to insulate itself against future uprisings. The first manifestation of this restructuring was the institution of an aggressive bureaucratic crackdown designed to make daily life unlivable for women who defy the mandatory hijab. This includes the utilization of CCTV and street-level surveillance to systematically record unveiled women and send them intimidating text messages informing them of arbitrary car confiscation orders (Amnesty International 2024b, 10-12). Security forces then set up checkpoints at busy junctions or block women in active traffic to impound their vehicles, leaving them stranded on the side of the road (4-5). Often, to reclaim the vehicle, women were subjected to long interrogations and forced to attend three-hour “morality classes,” where victims report verbal abuse and humiliation at the hands of instructors (9). In addition to the impounding of cars, unveiled women have been systematically denied access to airports, public transport, educational institutions, and employment opportunities, while simultaneously threatening to close the bank accounts of those who refuse to appear in court for their hijab violations (12).

In addition to bureaucratic warfare, the state has launched an unprecedented expansion of its surveillance dragnet and digital isolation of the country. The Ministry of the Interior ordered intelligence bodies to take extensive measures to photograph and verify the identity of women violating modesty laws at a national level using vandal-proof CCTV cameras equipped with Chinese facial recognition technology (Golkar 2026, 5). Furthermore, the regime has aggressively moved to isolate Iranians from the global internet by creating a “securitized internet” (8). The cyber police have since developed mandatory domestic mobile applications, such as a fake antivirus app called “Farez,” which experts warn acts as spyware to scan citizens’ phones and transfer data unencrypted to the government (6).

Furthermore, the expansions include structural upgrades and “purification” of the security apparatus, designed to fundamentally restructure the country’s law enforcement and intelligence bodies to better monitor society. This includes upgrading the “intelligence police” to the Intelligence Police Organization (FIPO), which is provided with vast new resources to monitor ordinary Iranians and suppress dissent groups (Golkar 2026, 4). It also includes the creation of dedicated civilian-cadre “Protection Units” to secure government ministries and data centers (5). Finally, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei initiated a “purification” project to guarantee absolute loyalty within the government; through the appointment of General Ahmad Vahidi—a commander infamous for his violent suppression of the 2009 Green Movement—as the new police chief, Khamenei is signaling a shift toward rigid, uncompromising approaches to quelling dissent (Iran International Newsroom 2024).

Expanding the massive net of selective repression designed to preemptively contain dissent is the implementation of the “Nour” Plan: the regime’s attempt to further localize political control by heavily integrating the Basij and the IRGC into neighborhood and public transit patrols. Once integrated, Basij members were granted the authority to stop citizens and search their cell phones for anti-regime content, operating with total impunity from the regular police (Golkar 2026, 6). Additionally, the Nour Plan stipulates that Basij members will be recruited to police metro stations and malls, while agents from the Special Forces and plainclothes officers are permitted to physically grab, hit, and film women who defied the veil, intentionally creating a climate of terror (Amnesty International 2024, 7; Iran International Newsroom 2024). Similarly, while not pertaining to the Nour Plan explicitly, the regime has doubled down on its utilization of the death penalty by 75% in an attempt to further spread terror designed to ensure political obedience (Golkar 2026, 7).

Critically, this massive and expansive wave of both selective repression and doubling down on—sometimes even dramatically expanding—existing enforcement mechanisms paints a harrowing picture of a regime built on the instillation of absolute terror within its population. For instance, surveillance has been a constant enforcement mechanism throughout the history of the country, starting with simple neighborhood networks of informants and, through various unrest cycles, has expanded to now cover CCTV footage surveillance and specific and refined departments for the analysis of that footage. This demonstrates particularly strong evidence for the women as mobilizers explanation, mapping out how the coercive apparatus actively reacts and preempts future periods of crisis.

Conclusion:

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that the Islamic Republic's repression of women is not merely reactive, but increasingly anticipatory, shaped by the recognition of women as high-impact mobilizers capable of transforming localized dissent into mass political crises. While early responses relied on co-optation and decentralized violence, later epochs reveal a clear shift toward institutionalized, preemptive repression, including the expansion of surveillance, the closure of civil society, and the professionalization of coercive forces. Crucially, moments in which women played central roles in mobilization—most notably during the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement—correspond with the most significant escalations in both the intensity and scope of state repression. This pattern suggests that the regime has learned from prior cycles of unrest, adapting its strategies to contain women's organizing capacity before it can fully materialize. As such, the women as mobilizers explanation

provides strong explanatory power, illustrating that gender-targeted repression in Iran is deeply intertwined with the regime's broader strategy of managing and preempting mass mobilization.

5.4 - Explanation 3: Gender Hierarchies and the Reproduction of Coercive Power

The coercive apparatus explanation posits that regimes rely on gender hierarchies to sustain the social and ideological foundations of coercive institutions, including the military and security apparatus. By reinforcing traditional gender roles—particularly women's roles as mothers and caretakers—regimes ensure the reproduction of future personnel, cultivate narratives of sacrifice and protection, and stabilize the broader social structures that underpin coercive power (Enloe 2014; Yuval-Davis 1997). In this sense, gender inequality contributes indirectly to regime durability by embedding coercive institutions within a supportive social and cultural framework. However, while elements of this mechanism are observable in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the evidence suggests that it functions primarily as a secondary and reinforcing dynamic rather than as the primary driver of gender-targeted repression.

During Epoch 1, elements of this argument are most visible in the regime's gender narratives during the Iran-Iraq War, where the state actively promoted women's roles as mothers of martyrs and moral guardians of the nation, framing reproductive labor and domestic sacrifice as essential contributions to the war effort (Mogahdam, 2013, 31). Women were encouraged to raise ideologically committed sons while simultaneously upholding the moral integrity of society through adherence to Islamic codes of conduct. In a speech one year into the war, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini states,

For this reason, the role of the mothers of kids and the fathers of the young ones is extremely important; if the children are in the lap of committed mothers and under the protection of committed fathers who ensure that their children are raised in the right way...upbringing starts from the lap of the pure mother and guidance of the father. With

the right Islamic upbringing they will lay the ground for safeguarding the independence and freedom of the country and make them committed to the interests of the country...The committed and combatant nation should be aware that they support the youth and children who are the assets and valuable resources of the country and save them from the evil of these American perverts. (Khomeini 2008, 15:110-111)

Within the speech, Khomeini equates the proper upbringing of children as one of the keys to ensuring a “committed and combatant nation,” drawing on the wartime context and equating the proper upbringing of children as not only an ideological duty, but as a critical function of maintaining the nation’s combative capabilities. Through this genre of rhetoric, proper Islamic child-rearing is presented as a matter of national security, aligning with the predictions of the coercive apparatus explanation. Even more critical is the distinction between the roles of mothers and fathers. While mothers are described as “committed” and “pure,” the fathers are assigned as protectors and guides, a dynamic that doubles down on the protectionist narratives seen within coercive institutions. Just as the military wife is supposed to commit to and wholeheartedly raise the next generation, mothers have been given the same duty. At the same time, the father is positioned in a protective role, creating a rhetorical dynamic where national security is not only linked with the raising of the next generation, but is done so by pure, committed mothers and protective fathers that mirror the balance between the military wife and the soldier.

However, while these patterns demonstrate that gender hierarchies contribute to the symbolic and social reproduction of coercive power, they do not independently account for the structure or persistence of the coercive apparatus itself. Instead, they are more convincingly understood as operating within the broader ideological framework outlined in the gender as ideological control explanation. The construction of women as moral guardians and reproducers of the nation reflects a symbolic logic in which gender functions as a vehicle for expressing national identity and legitimacy, rather than as a mechanism uniquely sustaining coercive

institutions. This overlap is particularly evident in the regime's use of masculinist protectionism. While this logic can be interpreted within the coercive apparatus explanation as a way of justifying the existence of coercive institutions, it more fundamentally operates within the gender as ideological control explanation by legitimizing autocratic authority and reinforcing the patriarchal bargain. In this context, rhetoric linking "pure" mothers and protective fathers to a "committed and combatant nation" does not simply mobilize gender for the reproduction of future soldiers, but more importantly, reinforces a broader narrative of national purity and resistance to perceived Western cultural intrusion. As such, although this language can support the ideological environment in which coercive institutions operate, its explanatory power is more significant when understood through the lens of symbolic control rather than institutional reproduction.

Then, in the post-war period (Epoch 2), the explanatory limits of the coercive apparatus explanation become even more apparent. While the regime continued to reinforce traditional family structures and promote women's domestic roles, the expansion and professionalization of coercive institutions—particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its paramilitary wing, the Basij—appear to have been driven more directly by strategic and institutional considerations than by reliance on gender norms. In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the intense ideological and revolutionary atmosphere that had dominated both the coercive apparatus and the country began to wane dramatically, even among regime advocates (Golkar 2015, 181). Simultaneously, the return of hundreds of thousands of war veterans presented a massive socioeconomic crisis for the new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei (17). The economy as a whole was shattered, and many returning Basiji and IRGC veterans grew deeply frustrated, feeling as though the government had

neglected their material needs and abandoned them during the shift toward post-war reconstruction (155-157). It was within this context that the coercive apparatus was dramatically expanded.

To appease dedicated supporters and war veterans, by their continued allegiance, and help fund the military amid postwar budget reductions, the regime fundamentally shifted its strategy to introduce massive material and non-material incentives through various mechanisms. Under the direction of Ayatollah Khamenei, the regime aggressively upgraded its financial support for the Basij through the Basij Cooperative Foundation (BCF), which was expanded in both 1991 and 1996 to act as a massive welfare and patronage network (Golkar 2015, 181; Kamrava 2023, 170-171). The BCF provided its members with low-interest loans, subsidized housing, heavily discounted consumer goods at Basij-owned hypermarkets, and discounted medical services (Golkar 2015, 156). Furthermore, to facilitate rapid social mobility for veterans and active members, the state implemented laws granting the Basiji special privileges, including reserving up to 40 percent of undergraduate university admissions for active members and explicit priority for government hiring, civil service jobs, and workplace promotions (181, 185-186). Simultaneously, in an attempt to depoliticize the armed forces and help them generate independent revenue in a desperate economy, IRGC members were actively encouraged to become involved in national reconstruction and commercial business ventures, eventually resulting in the IRGC establishing a massive engineering and construction arm in 1990, the Khatam al-Anbia headquarters (Kamrava 2023, 182-183; Ostovar 2016, 146-147). The government quickly began awarding them highly lucrative, no-bid government contracts for dams, railways, agriculture, and infrastructure projects, and, in the 1990s, Khatam al-Anbia were given priority to purchase state assets at bargain prices (Golkar 2015, 157). This allowed the

IRGC to buy massive sectors of the economy, transforming the IRGC and Basij from strictly ideological fighting forces to powerful economic cartels directly loyal to the regime and Supreme Leader (173).

These developments are not fully explained by the logic of gender hierarchy as outlined in the coercive apparatus explanation, which might predict that the expansion of coercive institutions is driven by the need to reinforce social order, moral regulation, and the gendered reproduction of the regime. Instead, the rapid growth of the IRGC and Basij during this period appears more directly tied to economic necessity, patronage expansion, and regime stabilization in the aftermath of war. In this context, gender hierarchy appears to function as a complementary mechanism that reinforces the moral and ideological legitimacy of these institutions, while the expansion of patronage networks to secure loyalty from the IRGC and Basij appears to be the main driver behind both the expansion and sustainment of the Iranian coercive apparatus.

Upon moving into Epochs 3, 4, and 5, we continue to see this pattern of secondary explanatory power, where the role of the coercive apparatus in enforcing gender norms expands dramatically, particularly through increased involvement in morality policing and public surveillance, one might assume these developments are consistent with the coercive apparatus explanation. At first glance, they appear to reinforce the prediction that the coercive apparatus would expand into everyday social regulation and the continued embedding of gender hierarchies within state enforcement mechanisms. However, a closer examination of the timing and context of this expansion suggests that it is more accurately explained as a reaction to women's increasing participation in political mobilization, rather than as a reflection of the institution's dependence on gender hierarchy.

As women became more visible in protest movements and civil society—particularly during the 2009 Green Movement and Women, Life, Freedom movement—the regime intensified its use of coercive institutions to regulate public behavior and suppress dissent. The increased involvement of the Basij and other security forces in enforcing dress codes and monitoring women’s presence in public spaces reflects a strategic response to perceived political threats, aligning more closely with the expectations of the women as mobilizers explanation than the coercive apparatus explanation. For, if gender hierarchies were the primary driver of coercive institutional expansion, we would expect such enforcement to remain relatively constant and structurally embedded, rather than intensifying in direct response to moments of political mobilization. Additionally, the IRGC has continued expanding its economic prowess, expanding to control an estimated 25% to 40% of Iran’s entire GDP, while high-ranking members of both the IRGC and Basij have become formally integrated into the executive branch, taking various cabinet seats and provincial governorships (Golkar 2015, 174; Kamrava 2023, 184). If gender were the primary tool of institutional maintenance, as the coercive apparatus explanation would claim, one would expect expansion to remain centered on reinforcing gendered social order, rather than extending so extensively into economic and political domains. This illuminates the coercive apparatus’s reliance on patronage to sustain its members, influence, and functionality—a reality supported by survey data that 79% of Basiji members report that financial issues are an important reason to continue their participation—rather than gender hierarchies alone (Golkar 2015, 184).

Certainly gender hierarchies remain present and continue to shape aspects of social regulation, but they do not appear to play a central role in driving this expansion. The increasing entrenchment of the IRGC within the economy through privatization, preferential access to state

resources, and political influence suggests that institutional survival is more closely tied to the consolidation of economic power and patronage networks. In this context, gender functions as a complementary ideological element rather than accounting for the structural evolution of the coercive apparatus itself. Thus, while gender hierarchy contributes to the broader ideological environment in which coercive institutions operate, the primary drivers of their expansion and persistence are rooted in economic control, political consolidation, and regime survival.

More broadly, the relationship between gender hierarchies and the coercive apparatus in the Iranian context appears to be indirect, rather than foundational. While the coercive apparatus explanation suggests that gender hierarchies sustain the coercive institutions themselves, the evidence indicates that these hierarchies more directly sustain the regime as a whole, which in turn, maintains and funds the coercive apparatus. In this sense, gender hierarchies' role in sustaining the coercive apparatus is again revealed as complementary, operating primarily through the mechanisms outlined in the gender as ideological control explanation and reinforcing the regime's ideological legitimacy and stability. Because the survival of the state's coercive institutions is ultimately contingent on the survival of the regime that supports them, gender hierarchies contribute to the persistence of these institutions indirectly rather than serving as their primary foundation. At the same time, this relationship creates a reinforcing dynamic, in which the coercive apparatus both depends on and actively enforces the gender hierarchies that sustain the regime, further blurring the distinction between the role of the gender as ideological control explanation and the coercive apparatus explanation.

More broadly, the relationship between gender hierarchy and the coercive apparatus in the Iranian context appears to be indirect rather than foundational. While the coercive apparatus explanation suggests that gender hierarchies sustain the coercive institutions themselves, the

evidence indicates that these hierarchies more directly sustain the regime, which in turn maintains and funds the coercive apparatus. In this sense, gender hierarchy operates primarily through the mechanisms outlined in the gender as ideological control explanation, reinforcing the regime's ideological legitimacy and stability. Because the survival of coercive institutions is ultimately contingent on the survival of the regime that supports them, gender hierarchies contribute to their persistence indirectly rather than serving as their primary foundation. At the same time, this relationship creates a reinforcing dynamic, in which the coercive apparatus both depends on and actively enforces the gender hierarchies that sustain the regime, further blurring the distinction between these mechanisms.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that while gender hierarchies are clearly embedded within the Iranian coercive apparatus, they do not independently explain its development, organization, or persistence. Instead, these hierarchies reinforce and operationalize broader ideological and political objectives—particularly those related to symbolic control and regime legitimacy. This suggests that the dynamics captured by the coercive apparatus explanation do not operate independently, but are instead mediated through the broader symbolic and ideological framework outlined in the gender as ideological control explanation. As such, this argument captures an important supporting dynamic in the Iranian case, but ultimately functions as a secondary mechanism that complements, rather than drives, the regime's strategy of gender-targeted repression.

5.5 - Explanation 1: Low-Intensity Repression as Cost-Saving

The low-cost repression explanation posits that regimes target women not for symbolic or ideological purposes, but rather as a part of a broader pattern of generalized repression, where

authoritarian states purposefully target a specific portion of the population to produce an overall chilling effect designed to dissuade the larger population from mobilizing against the regime. It specifically posits that women are often the “group of choice” due to the lower social costs associated with repressing a group whose participation in politics is already up for active debate. Under this framework, gender targeting would be expected to reflect the regime’s overall coercive capacity rather than any ideological or symbolic logic specific to women. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, where the regime clearly possesses and deploys aggressive, high-intensity repression against not only women, but various portions of the population, the evidence suggests that low-cost repression is less about cheaply producing a chilling effect, and instead functions as a highly structured, targeted, and ideologically specific form of repression designed to be implemented as complimentary to high-intensity repression.

Across all five epochs, the Iranian regime has demonstrated a consistent willingness to employ high-intensity repression against perceived threats. From its earliest days, the state relied on a combination of formal and informal coercive actors, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij, to violently suppress opposition and consolidate power (Alimagham 2020, 14; Ostovar 2016, 61). During the early post-revolutionary period, this took the form of widespread arrests, executions, and the systematic elimination of political opposition, including leftist and minority groups (Alimagham 2020, 33–34). Over time, these coercive forces evolved into a deeply institutionalized and multi-layered apparatus of repression, operating from centralized command structures down to neighborhood-level surveillance networks embedded within local communities (Golkar 2015, 77–78). This system enables the regime to monitor, identify, and neutralize dissent with a high degree of precision while maintaining the capacity for large-scale violence when necessary.

Subsequent protest cycles further illustrate the regime's reliance on high-intensity repression. During the 2009 Green Movement, security forces escalated their response by deploying Basij militias and IRGC units to violently suppress demonstrations, utilizing batons, firearms, and mass arrests to regain control (Golkar 2015, 100; Ostovar 2016, 183). This pattern intensified during the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement, where state forces employed live ammunition, deliberately targeted vital body parts, and carried out widespread detentions to quell nationwide unrest (UNHRC 2024, 109, 128–129). In tandem with physical repression, the regime has increasingly incorporated digital repression tactics, including internet shutdowns and surveillance, to disrupt coordination and obscure the scale of dissent (UNHRC 2024, 25). Additionally, judicial mechanisms have been systematically deployed to reinforce coercion, with protesters charged under broad national security laws such as “enmity against God” (*moharebeh*), often resulting in severe penalties, including execution (UNHRC 2024, 118). Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that the Islamic Republic possesses both the capacity and willingness to impose widespread, high-intensity repression across a variety of contexts.

At first glance, this pattern of repression appears consistent with the expectations of the low-cost repression explanation. The regime clearly targets segments of the population during periods of unrest, and its use of violence could plausibly generate a chilling effect that deters broader mobilization. However, a closer examination of gender-specific repression reveals that women are not simply selected as low-cost targets, but are instead subjected to forms of control that are highly structured, consistent, and deeply embedded within the regime's ideological framework.

First, the persistent and highly visible enforcement of the hijab cannot be adequately explained by a logic of low-cost repression. As demonstrated in the symbolic control

sub-mechanism, the regulation of women's dress functions as a central marker of regime identity, making it far more than a convenient or expendable tool of coercion (Sedghi 2009, 201; Sotoudeh 2023, 17). The state's willingness to enforce the hijab across all epochs—even at the cost of provoking large-scale unrest—suggests that this form of repression is not selected for its efficiency or low social cost, but for its symbolic and ideological importance. If the regime were primarily motivated by minimizing the costs of repression, one would expect greater flexibility or substitution toward less contentious targets. Instead, the regime repeatedly doubles down on gendered enforcement, even in the face of escalating resistance.

Second, the institutionalization of gender hierarchies within Iran's legal and political system further challenges the assumptions of the low-cost repression explanation. As outlined in the political/patriarchal control sub-mechanism, laws governing family relations, legal testimony, and economic participation systematically subordinate women while reinforcing male authority (Khorasani 2010, 119–121; Sadeghi 2023, 63). These policies are not temporary or opportunistic measures designed to produce a chilling effect, but rather durable institutional arrangements that structure everyday life. The depth and persistence of these legal frameworks indicate that gender targeting is not merely a byproduct of generalized repression, but a deliberate strategy embedded within the regime's broader system of governance.

Finally, the evidence provided for the women as mobilizers explanation demonstrates that women are treated as particularly consequential political actors due to their role as high-impact mobilizers. The regime's responses to movements such as the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement reveal not only an escalation in repression, but also a strategic adaptation of coercive tactics specifically aimed at containing women's participation (Alimaghani 2020, 69–70; UNHRC 2024, 104). This includes targeted arrests of female activists,

the expansion of morality policing, and the use of gender-specific violence designed to deter women from engaging in political activity. Such calibrated responses are inconsistent with the expectation of indiscriminate or low-cost repression, and instead point toward a more strategic and differentiated approach.

In this context, low-cost repression does not function as a substitute for high-intensity repression, but rather as a complementary mechanism embedded within a broader coercive strategy. Gender-targeted repression operates alongside, and often in coordination with, more overt forms of violence, serving distinct symbolic, institutional, and strategic functions that extend beyond the production of a generalized chilling effect. Therefore, the Iranian case suggests that while regimes may at times target vulnerable groups to deter dissent, the specific and persistent targeting of women cannot be reduced to a logic of cost efficiency alone. Consequently, while the low-cost repression explanation accurately captures the regime's capacity for widespread repression and its use of coercion to deter mobilization, it fails to account for the structured, gender-specific, and ideologically driven nature of repression in Iran. The evidence indicates that women are not targeted simply because they represent a low-cost group, but because they occupy a central role in the regime's symbolic identity, institutional framework, and political strategy. As such, the low-cost repression explanation provides only limited explanatory value, functioning primarily as a background condition that enables more targeted mechanisms—such as those outlined in Explanations 2 and 4—to operate effectively.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer a central puzzle in the study of authoritarianism: why do regimes continue to prioritize the repression of women even during periods of acute crisis, when prevailing theories of soft rationalism would predict moderation? Drawing on a single-case study of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1979 to the present, this study has argued that gender targeting is not an irrational byproduct of instability, but rather a strategic and foundational component of authoritarian rule. Through a combination of process tracing and temporal analysis, the findings demonstrate that gender repression in Iran is not only persistent across time, but systematically intensifies during periods of crisis, revealing its central role in regime survival. The analysis evaluated four primary explanations for gender targeting. Of these four, the most compelling explanations point to gender as a central tool of ideological control (Explanation 2) and to women's unique role in driving mass mobilization (Explanation 4), both of which consistently shape regime behavior in Iran. By contrast, the role of gender in sustaining coercive institutions (Explanation 3) appears to be more limited and secondary in nature, while the idea that gender repression functions primarily as a low-cost strategy (Explanation 1) serves more as a background condition than a primary cause.

First, the gender as ideological control explanation demonstrates that gender regulation is essential to the regime's ideological legitimacy and system of social control. Women, particularly through the enforcement of the hijab, are positioned as symbolic border guards of the nation, embodying the cultural and ideological boundaries of the Islamic Republic. Across all epochs, the regime consistently enforced gendered markers of identity—even in the face of widespread resistance—highlighting that these policies are not easily substitutable or strategically flexible.

Rather, they are foundational to how the regime defines itself. Furthermore, the institutionalization of gender hierarchies through legal codes and family law reinforces a dual patriarchal bargain: one that secures male loyalty through the patriarchal dividend, and another that frames the regime as a paternal protector in exchange for obedience. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate that regulating women is functionally equivalent to regulating the nation itself, making gender repression indispensable to regime identity and stability.

Second, the women as mobilizers explanation highlights women's role as high-impact mobilizers and the corresponding strategic response by the regime. The analysis shows that women have been central participants in nearly every major protest cycle in Iranian history, from the 1979 International Women's Day protests to the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement. Their ability to build cross-cutting coalitions, generate moral legitimacy, and sustain nonviolent resistance makes them uniquely threatening to authoritarian rule. In response, the regime has developed a patterned repertoire of countermeasures, including high-intensity repression, selective targeting, co-optation of civil society, and the expansion of gender-specific legal restrictions. Crucially, these responses are not reactive in a purely immediate sense, but increasingly preemptive, reflecting a learned recognition of women's mobilizing power. This dynamic reinforces the argument that gender targeting is not incidental, but strategically designed to prevent the emergence of large-scale, legitimate, and potentially successful movements.

In contrast, the coercive apparatus explanation, which posits that gender hierarchies are necessary for the reproduction of coercive institutions, finds only partial support. While gendered narratives of motherhood, sacrifice, and moral guardianship were particularly salient during the Iran-Iraq War, their importance appears to diminish in later periods. The evidence suggests that

the durability of coercive institutions such as the IRGC and Basij is driven more strongly by clientelism, ideological indoctrination, and institutional design than by reliance on traditional gender roles. Although gender hierarchies contribute to the broader ideological environment in which these institutions operate, they do not appear to be the primary mechanism sustaining their loyalty or effectiveness. As such, the coercive apparatus explanation functions as a secondary and supportive factor rather than a central explanation.

Finally, Explanation 1, which conceptualizes gender repression as a low-cost strategy for producing a chilling effect, captures an important dimension of authoritarian behavior but ultimately falls short in explaining the Iranian case. While the regime clearly employs both low- and high-intensity repression, the persistent and highly visible targeting of women cannot be reduced to cost-efficiency or opportunism. Instead, gendered repression operates alongside high-intensity coercion as part of a broader, integrated strategy. The enforcement of the hijab, the institutionalization of gender inequality, and the targeted repression of female activists all indicate that women are not selected merely because they are a “cheap” target, but because they occupy a central role in the regime’s symbolic, institutional, and political architecture.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this thesis: gender targeting is a strategic and vital component of authoritarian consolidation and maintenance because it provides unique symbolic, political, and institutional advantages. Symbolically, it allows regimes to define and enforce the boundaries of national identity. Politically, it enables regimes to justify intervention into both public and private life through narratives of protection and morality. Institutionally, it helps structure systems of loyalty, inequality, and control that extend from the household to the state. Most importantly, by targeting women, regimes are able to preemptively weaken one of the most powerful drivers of mass mobilization.

Contributions:

Beyond the Iranian case, this thesis contributes to the broader literature on authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in several key ways. First, it challenges the dominant assumption within soft rationalist frameworks that moderation is the most “rational” response to crisis. The Iranian case demonstrates that repression—particularly gendered repression—can itself be a rational and effective strategy for regime survival. Second, it advances the growing body of scholarship that positions gender not as a peripheral issue, but as a central analytic lens for understanding political power. Rather than treating gender inequality as a byproduct of authoritarianism, this thesis shows that it is actively produced and maintained as a core feature of authoritarian governance. Third, the simultaneous and overlapping application of three of the four explanations (Explanation 2, gender as ideological control, Explanation 4, women as high-impact mobilizers, and Explanation 3, maintenance of the coercive apparatus) highlights that these explanations are not solitary explanations designed to be examined in complete isolation, but can instead be seen as different dimensions of gender targeting. If one views each explanation as a competing, mutually exclusive explanation, they lose the intricacies of how the four interact, overlap, or support each other. In this way, the low-cost repression explanation can be seen as a tactical or operational dimension of gender repression; the gender as ideological and symbolic control explanation represents an ideological dimension of gender repression; the coercive apparatus explanation can be considered a coercive-institutional dimension; the women as high-impact mobilizers explanation represents a mobilizational dimension. While the low-cost repression explanation might not strongly apply to the Islamic Republic of Iran, it’s still a dimension of gender repression, and by extension, autocratization,

that can apply to other case studies. As such, it's critical to view these "explanations" as dimensions of the larger picture of gender repression, as without that nuance, one is doomed to miss critical overlaps. Fourth, it supports emerging arguments, such as those advanced by Çavdar and others, that attacks on gender equality can serve as an early warning indicator of democratic backsliding, highlighting the need to integrate gender more fully into the study of regime change. Finally, it holds policy significance, as, when gender is finally centered as a critical analytical lens rather than a byproduct, it necessitates that future democratic or humanitarian interventions view gender as a critical tool of authoritarian governance rather than as a byproduct of culture or modernization.

Limitations:

This thesis faces several limitations. The first is the author's inability to speak or read Farsi. Because a majority of these documents, speeches, and interviews are originally in Farsi, this thesis will rely on translations from credible NGOs and scholars in an attempt to preserve as much of the original meaning of the law as possible. However, as a result, the cultural and theological nuances present in the original Farsi text may be lost. Additionally, due to limited access to internal state documents, this thesis relies on public statements from the Supreme Leader and official state media such as the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) as proxies for regime intent. Given the centralized nature of authority within the Islamic Republic—where ultimate decision-making power rests with the Supreme Leader—these sources provide a reasonable approximation of official positions and priorities. If all important matters revert back to the decisions of the Supreme Leader, and access to internal memos is limited, utilizing official statements from the Supreme Leader or state-owned news networks acts as a reliable proxy for

intent. However, it must still be noted that, because it is a proxy and an English one at that, the content on these websites may be moderated to ensure that projections of Iran to the Western world are polished. Additionally, due to the presence of the Islamic Republic's National Information Network, a strict internet control mechanism that limits both information going into the country and information leaving it (O'Neil 2025). This provides an additional limitation, as the communications from the regime to the Iranian public are considerably more guarded, while the information being actively presented outside of the country to foreigners is heavily edited and regulated to project a specific image. Furthermore, budgetary opacity prevents the ability to produce exact budgetary discrepancies between ideological and non-ideological parts of the coercive apparatus. As such, approximations based on available budgetary categories will be utilized in tandem with secondary analyses to produce data that is as close to accurate as possible. Another potential limitation of this study is its reliance on feminist frameworks primarily developed or refined within Western academic institutions. While scholars such as Moghadam and Yuval-Davis offer transnational and post-colonial perspectives, some of the core concepts used in this thesis—such as the patriarchal bargain and gendered nationalism—originate from Global North academic traditions. To mitigate this theoretical distance, the study triangulates these frameworks with primary state discourse from Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) and *Khamenei.ir* (the Ayatollah's official English website) to ensure the analysis remains grounded in the specific ideological reality of the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, the author cannot safely conduct on-the-ground fieldwork or interviews with activists inside Iran, meaning this thesis relies on digital and archival footprints, which may not capture the full diversity of everyday resistance, harassment, or other dynamics happening away from the internet. Finally, because this thesis analyzes ongoing developments, the long-term

outcomes of preemptive strategies in Epoch 5 (defined in Chapter Two) cannot yet be fully assessed. These limitations primarily affect the precision of measurement rather than the underlying causal logic of the analysis.

The Future of the Women, Life, Freedom Movement:

The Women, Life, Freedom Movement represented the largest contemporary culmination of women's rights within the Islamic Republic of Iran, and critically, was centered around the hijab—the very symbol defining the regime's ideology. In response, as discussed previously, the regime engaged in increasingly drastic and targeted repression campaigns designed to crush popular mobilization and instill fear through constant surveillance and harassment. Thus, from an outside lens, it would appear that the Women, Life, Freedom movement has fizzled out in the face of intense repression. However, it is critical to understand that, while it may be less organized, women in Iran have not stopped resisting—far from it. Instead, there's been a transition from organized mass protests to everyday resistance. Just as women wore bright colors, makeup, and shorter chadours in the post-War era, women in Iran continue to engage in various forms of everyday resistance (Esfandiari 1997, 49). Bayat (2013) argues that because everyday resistance, or what he calls nonmovements, is woven into the flow of daily life, they are particularly difficult for a regime to suppress—even one as intense as the Islamic Republic (21). The effectiveness of everyday resistance lies in its “ordinariness,” where persistent, decentralized, and irrepressible actions of ordinary citizens incrementally divert power from the state and patriarchal structures (86-87). By continuously establishing new “social facts on the ground” and forging new lifestyles and modes of thinking, these movements eventually acclimatize the state to new forms of resistance, forcing authorities to recognize and account for

the public's changing outlook (315). Fully suppressing everyday resistance requires a spectacular level of surveillance, checkpoints, and daily detentions to disrupt the flow of society, and while the Islamic Republic has increased its efforts, daily resistance persists (21).

Most prominently, has been the defiance of the mandatory hijab—even in the face of increased enforcement. Millions of Iranian women, particularly those in their teens and twenties, are openly defying the dress code in unprecedented numbers despite the severe risks to their freedom and lives. Simply by walking and existing in public spaces without the hijab, these women project a fierce image of defiance designed to counter the regime (Tajali 2025). In tandem, the rise of social media has allowed women to document their unveiling online, transforming everyday resistance into active cyber-activism that challenges the state's narrative and reaches both local and global audiences (Tajali 2025; UNHRC 2025, 97-98). Iranian women also engage in everyday resistance within the home through the intentional adoption of “permissive upbringing,” a child-rearing style characterized by low control, high support, discussion, and persuasion (Kian 2023, 181-183). The switch is a deliberate form of protest against the patriarchy and the oppressive values propagated by the Islamic regime. By placing value on their children's well-being and respecting their opinions, parents foster an unprecedented level of individual freedom and autonomy in the family, directly leading to the rejection of obedience to authority in the youth, and the emergence of a cultural counter-weight to autocratic rule (183).

Critically, it is not just unveiled women who are resisting or actively participating in the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Throughout Iranian history, women's rights have been spearheaded by a diverse coalition of women, including those who are religious or veiled, and thousands of veiled women took to the streets during both the 2009 Green Movement and the

WLF movement (Moghadam 2013, 201). Veiled women also participate in everyday resistance by proudly using their physical presence in public spaces to embody agency and autonomy, while claiming their proper place in public, rather than the confines of the domestic sphere. For example, veiled women have historically utilized the chadour to push forcefully through crowded bazaars, securing an unabashed public presence and defying gendered segregation (Moruzzi 2025, 229). Veiled women will also resist by refusing to adhere to segregated seating on public transportation or challenging restrictions on female athletes by engaging in sports or forcing their way into male-only sports stadiums to celebrate victories (Bayat 2013, 92; Sedghi 2009, 254). Veiled and religious women also engage in resistance beyond physical defiance, engaging in theological reinterpretations and legal advocacy often coined as “Islamic Feminism” (Afary 2009, 292; Golkar 2015, 108). These women actively challenge the clerical establishment’s monopoly over religious authority, advocating for progressive interpretations of the Quaran and Shari’a law to fight against institutionalized gender inequality, and demand reforms to family law, child custody rights, and restrictions on polygamy (Bayat 2013, 18, 95). Some may even challenge the legitimacy of the mandatory hijab itself, advocating for a choice framework (Sotoudeh 2023, 31). Although, it is worth noting that some scholars prefer the term post-Islamic feminism, which transcends the dichotomy of “Islamic” versus “secular” by utilizing Islamic theology to push for equality while also openly drawing from Western feminist literature (Bayat 2023, 93-94)

As a final note, it is worth addressing how recent attacks on Iran by the United States and Israel may play a part in the less visible nature of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Baker and Oneal (2001) highlight what is known as the “rally around the flag” effect, which describes the political phenomenon of the public putting aside partisan differences to unite behind their

national leadership during times of major international crisis, war, or external threat (664). This effect is particularly potent in Iran due to the country's deep history of nationalism. Unlike many contemporary national identities that are the product of imperial or colonial map-making, Iranian national awareness significantly predates the modern era. The nation's identity is defined by a remarkably constant attachment to the concepts of *Iran Zamen* (the Land of Iran) and *Iran Shahr* (the Country of Iran), alongside a historical presumption of greatness, advanced civilization, and a perceived right to regional preeminence in the absence of any colonialist history (Abrahamian 2008, 2). This nationalist sentiment has been utilized by both the previous Pahlavi Dynasty and the current Iranian regime, and has become fused with anti-imperialist sentiment towards the West, the United States, and Israel (Abrahamian 2008, 121; Alimagham 2020, 144-147). Thus, despite severe domestic fractures and widespread dissatisfaction with the government, nationalism remains highly potent, binding the country together (Kamrava 2023, 23, 40). As such, direct attacks on Iranian soil by the United States are likely to produce an intense rally around the flag effect, likely leading to a temporary halt or decline in social movements like the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Yet, as discussed earlier, the movement is far from gone, but has likely progressed into everyday resistance rather than organized political protesting.

Future Research:

Future research could build on this study by extending the analysis beyond a single-case design to examine variation in gender targeting across different authoritarian regimes.

Comparative work could help identify whether the mechanisms identified here—particularly the symbolic and mobilizational roles of gender—travel across cases with different institutional and cultural contexts. Additionally, further research could incorporate primary sources in local

languages to better capture the nuances of regime discourse and everyday resistance. More fine-grained, micro-level studies may also shed light on how gendered repression is experienced and negotiated by individuals within these systems. Incorporating interviews with activists, policymakers, or individuals directly affected by gendered repression could add significant depth to this analysis by providing insight into how these dynamics are experienced, interpreted, and navigated on the ground. Finally, as contemporary protest movements continue to evolve, longitudinal studies will be necessary to assess the long-term effectiveness of gender-targeted repression as a strategy of regime survival.

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