

“Woman, Life, Freedom”: Collective Female Resistance in Iran

Isabella Knaus

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Dr. Gamze Çavdar

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Abstract

This Honors Thesis examines the strategies of political activism leveraged by Iranian women during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement that has ravaged the Iranian political landscape since the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022. It starts with an analysis of the history of women’s activism in Iran, then continues into a description of the political and cultural mechanisms that influence the status of Iranian women; then, it describes the most recent political and social movements in which Iranian women have participated in political activism in the twenty-first century. The body of the paper delves into the case of Jina Amini’s death and the ensuing “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, examining the ways in which Iranian women lead the movement as political activists, including via street protests, student demonstrations, information and communications technology deployment, electoral boycotts, and reenactments. This Thesis argues that Iranian women have positioned themselves to continue to disrupt the status quo and threaten the power of the Iranian regime, underscoring the power of collective female resistance.

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Introduction

In the shadow of an oppressive authoritarian regime and social constraints, Iranian women have emerged as powerful, and somewhat surprising, architects of change. These women have leveraged creative means to defy the regime's iron-fisted grip. For decades, women's activism in Iran has not only challenged political and gender norms but has also redefined the very nature of resistance in an environment inhospitable to modernization. In spite of highly conservative Islamic institutions and political systems that hinder forward progress in the realm of gender equality and empowerment, Iranian women have continued in their pursuit of equality and justice. From the Constitutional Revolution in the early 1900s and the White Revolution of the 60s to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the ensuing sociopolitical movements, Iranian women have been and continue to be active in the Iranian political scene. The most recent example of this activism is the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022, a culmination of decades of activism against mandatory veiling laws and regime crackdowns on public demonstrations.

This thesis raises the question as to how do women challenge and resist the status quo in Iran, how have these strategies evolved since 2022, and what have been their impact? The overarching goal of this Honors thesis is to explore the myriad of strategies employed by Iranian women-including active protests against repressive hijab mandates, student demonstrations, social media activism, electoral boycotts, and reenactments- to shape national discourse and global perceptions of female resistance since 2022. In highlighting these dynamic forms of activism, we can gain insight into the modern and recent role of women as challengers to the Iranian status quo.

This thesis consists of 7 main sections. First, it outlines the history of women's activism in Iran. Then, it outlines the political structures and entities that comprise the Iranian government and their impact on women. The third section delves into the cultural factors that impact the status of Iranian women. The fourth section describes the modern social or political movements in which Iranian women have played a role as activists. The fifth section marks a turning point in the focus of the paper, from foundational context to the primary case study-the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. The next section outlines different types of women's activism that took place throughout the duration of this particular movement, including active protests, student demonstrations, social media activism, electoral boycotts, and reenactments. The final section examines the impact and results of this movement. This paper overarchingly challenges the notion that Iranian women are passive in their fates and asserts that the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is yet another example of the power of collective female resistance.

History of Women's Activism in Iran

This section will highlight the key time periods, social or political movements, and figures that have most shaped both the legacy of women's activism in Iran and the modern status of women in Iran. This section aims to illuminate the complexities and oscillating nature of women's struggle against injustice and its enduring impact on the contemporary state of Iran. It starts briefly at the turn of the 20th century and continues chronologically throughout the 20th century by highlighting a few key periods and movements most relevant in this history of women's activism in Iran.

The seeds of women's activism in Iran were first sown at the turn of the 20th century after the 1906-11 Constitutional Revolution with the foundation of the Iranian Women's Rights

Movement and the creation of several civil society organizations, such as the Society for Women's Freedom and the Women's Revolutionary Association (Keddie, 2000, p. 405; Tajali, 2022, p. 181). At this time, Iranian women became increasingly aware of their lower status in society and so began to pursue formal avenues of activism via publication and education, thus forming these civil society organizations (Keddie, 2007, p. 22). This was one of the first waves of Iranian women's activism and propelled women, for the first time, into the sphere of political participation and dissemination of knowledge to bring more women activists into the fold. However, this momentum faced significant setbacks under Reza Shah Pahlavi's rule, when these women's associations were dissolved (Keddie, 2000, p. 405). Women struggled to regain momentum and gain equal rights and privileges for several decades.

The White Revolution, undertaken by Mohammad Reza Shah between 1963 and 1979, was a sweeping political and social reform program meant to bolster his public image and catalyze the development of the country. During this period, Iranian women achieved significant victories, including the right to vote and the ability to run for and hold public office (Keddie, 2007, p. 21). In fact, by 1978, 22 women sat in the Iranian Parliament and 333 women served on their local elected councils (Esfandiari, 2010). One of the most significant achievements for Iranian women in this time period was the introduction of the Family Protection Law, which advanced gender equality in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody:

Under it strict limits were put on polygamy; husbands could no longer get a divorce with only a thrice-repeated statement; both husbands and wives had to go to court for a divorce; and grounds for divorce were similar for both. Child custody... now went to family courts for adjudication, and could go to either parent (Keddie, 2000, p. 406).

This law cultivated greater equality in a dimension of social oppression often overlooked: domestic life. In a society where women are expected to get married, have children, and stay at home, this law provided them with protections in the legal system. Concurrently, the period saw

a dramatic increase in female education and workforce participation. Between 1971 and 1978, for example, women's college enrollment increased to 79%; employed women with advanced degrees (bachelor's or higher) increased from 17,000 to 109,000; and female participation in the measured labor force reached 11% (Moghadam, 1995, p. 340). In 1978, one third of university students were female, and two million women were in the workforce (Esfandiari, 2010). Women were entering professions outside of the domestic sphere, creating a more equal workforce and impacting society across social strata (Keddie, 2000, p. 406). These changes, which came about as a result of the Shah's rapid modernization program, led to a "small yet growing layer of very visible, unveiled, vocal, and educated women with a potential for autonomy", which threatened the traditional Muslim family and patriarchal social structure (Moghadam, 1995, p. 340). The progress made during this period marked a significant shift in women's roles and rights in Iran, reflecting the substantial strides they had made and the momentum they had gained.

The Pahlavi dynasty, and its success in the realm of gender equality and justice, ended with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This event entirely pivoted the trajectory of women's rights and activism in Iran, and marked a major turning point in both the political landscape and the status of women. For those unfamiliar, 1979 marks the year in which Iran transformed from an absolute monarchy under Mohammad Reza Shah into an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. After waves of mass demonstrations and a popular revolution, state and religion became completely unified as conservative religious leaders experimented with a political system centered around their interpretation of Islamic scripture (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010, p. 885).

A crucial aspect to note of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was that countless women joined the revolution against the Shah. Although their reasons varied- "economic deprivation,

political repression, and identification with Islamism”-a diverse cross-section of Iranian women supported and participated in the revolution, including “self-identified Communists, socialists, liberals, nationalists, and Islamists” (Moghadam, 1995, p. 341). Those street demonstrations included “huge continents of women wearing the veil as a symbol of opposition to Pahlavi bourgeois or Westernized decadence” (Ibid., 341). Iranian women wanted social and political change, so they publicly displayed their demands alongside countless other Iranian citizens.

Despite this fact that women themselves had supported and participated in the revolution and the values it claimed it espoused, the revolution and its impacts ultimately were not ideal for women (Ghasseminejad et al., 2020). The large majority of Iranian leadership had not accepted the premise of gender equality: “in practice, this has meant that religious doctrine had been (selectively) merged into the powerful, centralizing and historically authoritarian state in Iran in order to pave the way for the conservative religious vision of a ‘good Muslim society’” in which women were “made the object of social and economic policies and restrictive legal reforms” (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010, p. 886). Although women from all socioeconomic strata, political affiliations, and ethnic demographics actively supported and participated in the revolution, the new regime quickly began undermining their rights, “reviving gender segregation and undoing the existing family laws” to ensure continued support from conservative forces and pursue an Islamic society based on gender apartheid (Ghasseminejad et al., 2020). The notion that women had “‘lost honor’ during the Pahlavi era” permeated Iranian social and political spheres; Islamists, and particularly political elites, felt that “‘genuine Iranian cultural identity’ had been distorted by Westernization” (Moghadam, 1995, p. 342; Tajali, 2022). This sentiment was written into the 1979 constitution, which “spelled out the place of Woman in the ideal Islamic society”, in which male and female roles were entirely distinct and as different as possible from

gender norms in the West; moreover, female roles became entirely privatized, and “the necessity of modesty in dress and demeanor” was codified (Ibid., 342). Within two weeks of coming to power, men had regained the right to divorce, polygamy, and “temporary marriages”, sexual relations outside marriage were criminalized, the age of maturity for girls was set at nine years and for boys at 14, and women were required to abide by Islamic veiling practices (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010, p. 891). Many women who had worn the veil as a symbol of protest leading up to the revolution had not expected veiling to become mandatory, so were alarmed when this came to fruition. This revolution essentially reversed the impact of the former Family Protection Law of the White Revolution era. Women had become explicit targets of social, cultural, and political restrictions.

This is so significant because it illustrates that while Iranian women have a long and tenuous history of subjugation and oppression, they also have a long history of resistance and activism. When Khomeini announced the compulsory veiling law, for example, Iran experienced the largest street demonstrations in the history of the Iranian women’s movement. These protests continued for six days straight, and despite the fact that women were “met with violence and branded as traitors, counter-revolutionaries, bourgeois, pro-imperialist stooges, or even prostitutes”, they succeeded when the government (temporarily) retracted their position on the veil (Ziaee, 2022). I note that this retraction of the mandatory veiling law was only temporary because in 1981, after many left-leaning politicians and organizations had been eliminated from the political sphere, the Iranian regime ultimately made veiling compulsory. The mandatory veiling law is incredibly relevant to the primary focus of this thesis because the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement has centered around this law and its enduring damage to women in Iran. However, the continual protests and movements against this law also illustrate that Iranian

women are persistent as they are powerful, and their political contributions to both the revolution itself and its aftermath have disallowed Iranian leaders from ignoring women as agents of politics and change.

Political Factors Impacting the Status of Women

Understanding the status of women in Iran requires an intersectional exploration of the political and social mechanisms that shape their lives. Iranian political structure, legal frameworks, and cultural norms are the key factors that influence the role that women play in society, both in alignment with and in opposition to the status quo. Analyzing these factors can illuminate when, why, and how women resist this status quo. This section will start from the top of the Iranian political hierarchy and focus on the impact of these mechanisms on Iranian women.

Officially titled the Islamic Republic of Iran, this country is internationally recognized as an Islamic theocratic republic, a form of government in which the political power is ultimately concentrated in the hands of Islamic religious leaders. In the case of Iran, political power is primarily held by the Supreme Leader, who oversees all branches of government and state entities, including the armed forces, the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, and the Expediency Council, an organization that “mediates disputes between the Guardian Council and the parliament” (Freedom House, 2023). This position is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, an 88-member group of clerics-which, in theory, monitors his decisions-but, in practice, lets his decisions go unchallenged. The current Supreme Leader is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who came to power after the death of the founding father of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (*Iran: How Ayatollah Khamenei Became Its Most Powerful Man*, 2020). Generally

speaking, Khamenei has made his views on women and their deserved rights very clear: he believes that men and women are not equal in all aspects of life, especially with regards to sexual expression, domestic responsibility, and employability. He has also expressed his discontent for the recent push against mandatory veiling laws, stating that “modest clothing is one of the preconditions for preventing corruption” (Hanna, 2020). Again, and as can be seen throughout this paper, a common thread in the repression of Iranian women is this mandatory veiling law under a very conservative interpretation and implementation of Islam and Islamic law. Generally, the Supreme Leader sets the tone for the rest of the government and, to a large extent, the country. So, to maintain such stances on women’s rights is to perpetuate political and social restraints against women. The oppressive beliefs of the highest echelon of Iran’s political structure trickle down throughout the rest of Iranian government and society.

To build on this, the government of Iran functions under a combination of Islamic sharia law and secular law, with a heavy expansion of sharia law since the 1979 Revolution. This legal system, and especially as implemented by the Iranian judiciary, preserves the Islamic basis of the Iranian government and reflects a niche interpretation of Shiite jurisprudence, which is not necessarily embraced by all Iranian citizens. This Islamic penal code includes “stoning, amputations and flogging, all considered torture under international law” as potential criminal consequences (Ghaemi, 2015). As the legal system pertains to the status of women, it includes broad discriminatory laws against girls and women, many of which have already been discussed. A particularly relevant manifestation of the Islamic penal code in Iranian society is the mandatory veiling law; this law requires all women and girls to cover their hair in public at all times with the traditional Muslim hijab, and maintains harsh consequences for those who fail to abide (Esfandiari, 2010). Another relevant law pertaining to women in Iran is the age of criminal

responsibility for women and men; men can be held criminally responsible at age fifteen, and women can be held criminally responsible at age nine, a fact that clearly illustrates gender discrimination (Ibid). A final example that demonstrates the systemic gender discrimination in Iran is that a woman's testimony in court is only "given half the weight of a man's, and the monetary compensation awarded to a female victim's family upon her death is half that toward the family of a male victim" (Freedom House, 2023). Clearly, women are systematically discriminated against in the Iranian legal and political system.

This is true in the Iranian electoral system as well, a system that is internationally considered to not meet international democratic standards. According to Freedom House, a research institution that focuses on the global state of democracy and human rights, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds regular elections, but they fall short of democratic standards due to the influence of an unelected entity called the Guardian Council, which "disqualifies all candidates it deems insufficiently loyal to the clerical establishment" (Freedom House, 2023). In other words, the Guardian Council, which is controlled by hard-line conservatives and the Supreme Leader, preliminarily vets all candidates running for parliament, presidency, or the Assembly of Experts; this council also rejects any and all candidates not already considered insiders to the inner circles of the political sphere, especially women seeking to run in the presidential election (Ibid). This severely limits the candidates for which Iranian citizens can vote, especially considering only the political parties considered to be loyal to the government and state ideology can even enter into the competition. Although women are *technically* permitted to run for and hold public office, this does not occur *in practice*; in fact, no female candidate has ever been allowed to run for president in the history of Iran (Ibid). This system directly and explicitly curbs the formal political power and status of women in Iran. As Mona Tajali laid out in her chapter entitled

“Organizing Against All Odds: Iranian Factionalism and Women’s Political Representation”, the electoral and political structures are designed in a way that not only impedes meaningful party competition, but prevents women from “being able to apply sustained pressure - whether from within or outside of parties - on male elites to be inclusive of women” in politics (Tajali, 2022, p. 210). Clearly, women are systemically excluded and actively repressed in the electoral and political mechanisms that comprise the Iranian regime.

The final aspect of the political system that directly curbs the autonomy of Iranian women is the law enforcement apparatus. This is particularly relevant in this paper’s discussions of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, as the suppression of this movement occurred under the oversight of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). One specific organization within the IRGC is the Basij, which is a volunteer paramilitary organization that specializes in “internal security, law enforcement, special religious or political events and morals policing” (Alfoneh, 2010). The Basij have contributed to the militarization of the regime and its policies, and have played an especially relevant role in the enforcement of the mandatory hijab. During the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, the Basij were extremely active in quashing dissent and violently cracking down on protestors.

Cultural Factors Impacting the Status of Women

Cultural factors also play into the current status of Iranian women. Iran is an Islamic theological republic, meaning that the entire social and political spheres are built on the foundation of Shi’a Islam. This is not to say that the whole of the country falls under the category of Shi’a Islam; rather, recent survey data from the group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran and the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran illustrate

this number to be closer to 40% (Arab & Maleki, 2020). This same survey found that only 32% identified as Shi'ite Muslim, 5% as Sunni Muslim, 3% as Sufi Muslim, 8% as Zoroastrian, and 1.5% as Christian (Ibid). For a country that self-identifies as a Shi'a nation, there appears to be more religious diversity on a granular level; this is typical of an authoritarian government that seeks to repress its citizens. Despite this, since the 1979 Revolution, which reinforced a system built on a very conservative interpretation of Islam, those in power have imposed these strict Shi'a Muslim beliefs onto the whole of society, a burden which disproportionately falls on women. This manifests in such dimensions as domestic life, employment, and dress.

Firstly, Iranian cultural norms often prioritize stereotypical gender roles and uphold traditional patriarchal social structure. Traditionally, women are expected to play essential roles in the domestic sphere, as caregivers, homemakers, wives, and mothers (Zadeh, 2023). While this means that women dominate the domestic sphere in all family matters, it also means that men dominate the public sphere and hold more decision-making authority. Men are generally considered to be financially and legally responsible for supporting their families, which translates directly into a higher proportion of men in all industries. This cultural aspect also impacts the labor force participation rate of women, which is defined as “the proportion of the population ages 15 and older that is economically active: all people who supply labor for the production of goods and services during a specified period” (International Labour Organization, 2023). In 2022, 67.5% of Iranian men in that category participated in the workforce, as compared to just 13.6% of women (Ibid). Women are systematically and culturally herded into the domestic sphere of the economy, which leaves the majority of the public sphere up to the authority and purview of men. Due to the cultural expectations on both genders, for women to stay at home and for men to be the breadwinner, women's authority is limited to domestic life.

Ultimately, according to the Cultural Atlas, the independence and self-determination of an Iranian woman is based on the attitude of her husband or closest male relative: “i.e. to work, get an education, marry, divorce, bear children or not” (Evason, 2016). This family structure directly shapes the economic structure of Iran and simultaneously and explicitly elevates men and limits women.

Finally, and most relevantly to the overarching topic of this thesis, women’s autonomy over their own body is policed as a result of conservative Islamic culture. Women are legally mandated to wear the traditional Muslim headscarf, and cover their figures with loose clothing, as both a display of faith and modesty and as a physical segregation between genders. According to Islamic scripture, all “believing women” should maintain their “position of honor” by drawing their clothes and veils “over their bodies, so that they will be separated or partitioned from men who are not related to them (Ibn Kathir, n.d.). Women are expected to ensure their honor and modesty by covering up anything that could be considered an “erotic provocateur”, like her figure and her hair (Evason, 2016). Prior to the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iranian women could express their faith in any way they wanted; they were not necessarily required to wear the hijab or go to prayer five times a day. However, since 1979, the hijab has been a legally mandated religious practice, and women are punished harshly for failing to abide. This culturally-based mandate clearly inhibits Iranian women’s rights to bodily autonomy, self-expression, and self-determination.

Given the deeply entrenched political hierarchy, the oppressive legal system and the laws it births, and the pervasive cultural expectations and norms, it is truly remarkable how women in Iran continue to forge their own paths as activists. In the face of a system designed to repress

them, their resilience and desire to build anew is a testament to their commitment to a better future.

Modern Women's Activism in Iran

Iranian women's legacy of activism did not end with the revolution; in fact, it has continued to evolve and expand throughout these first two decades of the 21st century. From 2006-2008, Iranian women undertook what came to be known as the One Million Signatures Campaign, an effort to persuade the Iranian Parliament to reform a host of discriminatory laws against women. Fifty-four founding members started an independent, grassroots movement with the aim of collecting one million signatures in pursuit of all of the rights covered under the original Family Protection Law as well as additional reforms, including equal marriage and divorce rights for women, an end to polygamy and temporary marriages, and equal testimony for women (Passanante, 2011). While the petition ultimately did not achieve one million signatures as initially envisioned, it did generate greater discourse on gender equality and policy in Iran.

The Green Movement is another modern example of Iranian women's activism. In 2009, Iranian citizens were postured to vote in the election for president, considered to be the second highest office in the Iranian political structure, second only to the Supreme Leader. Incumbent presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was expected to cede power to his more moderate challenger, former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi (Afary & William Avery, 2024). This would be one of the most publicly contested presidential elections in the history of the Islamic Republic. Ultimately, both candidates claimed victory in the election, but according to Iran's Interior Ministry, incumbent Ahmadinejad had won 62.6% of the vote (Berman et al., 2009). Mousavi strongly believed this to be the result of electoral fraud and conspiracy and urged his

supporters to protest. Shortly thereafter, millions of people marched through the streets of Iran, chanting “Where is my vote?”, a slogan that would define the uprising now referred to as the Green Movement (Milani, 2010). This was a fight for equality before the law, “irrespective of gender, religion and ideology”, and for a separation of religion and state, and women were at the forefront of that fight (Ibid). For some, it was a novel image of hundreds of thousands of Iranian women marching through the streets, but this was just another example of Iranian women advocating for democratic values, for gender equality, and for justice under the law. Women’s involvement in this movement reflects their enduring commitment to advocacy, activism, and self-determination in the midst of a repressive environment.

The sentiments and values espoused by Iranian women and citizens during the Green Movement have only grown stronger. With the advent of a more globalized, connected world and the rise of social media and the digital space, Iranian women have found new and creative ways to resist the status quo. Since 2009, waves of electoral campaigns, online movements, street protests, and other forms of activism have flooded the Iranian political, social, and cultural sphere. A prominent example of this is a movement known as “My Stealthy Freedom”, a non-profit organization that started on Facebook when political journalist Masih Alinejad posted a photo of herself without a hijab and sparked support from women within Iran (Alinejad, 2024). “My Stealthy Freedom” became an official Facebook page in May 2014 and served as a space for Iranian women and diaspora to share their acts of civil disobedience by taking stealthy photos of themselves without the mandatory hijab; nowadays, “My Stealthy Freedom” manages multiple civic engagement and political awareness initiatives in pursuit of freedom of expression and gender equality (Ibid). One such initiative, introduced in 2017, encouraged Iranian women to wear white headscarves on Wednesdays as a means of peaceful protest against the compulsory

hijab laws (Ibid). “My Stealthy Freedom” and its founder assert that women “carry the most visible symbol of an oppressive regime on [their] bodies”, emphasizing the critical importance which makes women’s activism in the pursuit for democracy and equality (Ibid).

In December 2017, on Revolution Street in Tehran, a woman named Vida Mohaved stood up in front of a crowd, tied her white hijab to a stick, and “waved it to the crowd as a flag” (Farvardin, 2024, p. 292). Because she had taken off her hijab, and was actively perpetuating civil disobedience, she was immediately arrested, but the video of her protest went viral. Vida and her photograph became a symbol of civil disobedience and political activism for a number of different causes, including the fight against mandatory hijab laws and political corruption in the Iranian regime (Ibid., 292). Her image became such an icon, in fact, that other women began doing the same performance on the same street in Tehran, and even on other streets in other cities. Most of the protesters were beaten and arrested right after their performance, but the “individual eventually coalesced into a collective feminist movement known as the “Girls of the Revolution Street” (Ibid., 292).

To conclude, it is clear that women’s activism in Iran is not simply a historical legacy, but an enduring movement, or series of movements, all in pursuit of equality, justice, and self-determination. From the Green Movement to the Girls of Revolution Street, Iranian women are exemplars of the fight against oppression despite every systemic obstacle in their way. Although gender-based oppression in Iran continues, as does women’s activism. As this thesis moves into its examination of the most recent social movement in Iran, it will analyze the tragic death of Jina Mahsa Amini and the ignition of a renewed sense of agency and determination for Iranian women.

Introduction to the Case of Jina Mahsa Amini

This thesis has thus far explored the history of women’s activism in Iran, the political and social factors that influence the status of Iranian women, and modern movements in which Iranian women have played a part. Now that the foundation is laid, the remainder will focus on the most relevant and current period of women’s activism in Iran, starting with one person whose death sparked a movement that has brought significant and lasting trepidation to the Iranian government. This person was a 22-year-old woman from Saqqez, Kurdistan Province, in northwestern Iran, named Jina Mahsa Amini. The international community knows her as Mahsa Amini, as that was her legal Iranian name, but her Kurdish birth name was “Jina”, meaning “life”.

On September 13, 2022, while visiting Tehran, Jina Amini was taken into the custody of the Iranian “morality police” for allegedly improperly complying with the mandatory veiling law (Bajec, 2022). It is believed that Amini was beaten during her transfer to the detention center; after spending three days in a coma as a result of her injuries, she died in an Iranian hospital under the supervision of Iranian police (Izadi & Dryden, 2024). Iranian officials claimed that her death was caused by a heart attack. However, Amini’s parents and Iranian protesters have maintained that she died after sustaining brutal beatings while in custody (Akram, 2024). Jina Amini’s death sparked a massive social movement, dubbed “Woman, Life, Freedom”, or “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*” in Kurdish. Thousands of people took to the streets nationwide, and for 82 consecutive days, protests raged across the country.

Types of Women's Activism in Iran

Active Street Protests

The most obvious strategy of activism leveraged by Iranian women during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement was street demonstrations. This is one of the most active and direct forms of activism undertaken by Iranian women during this movement and offers the clearest glimpse into the motivations and successes of this movement. After the death of Jina Amini in state custody, tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets for 82 consecutive days in fall 2022, and sporadically since. Women in particular, activated by the mandatory hijab law that Jina Amini had been arrested for violating in the first place, led these protests. Thousands of women stormed the streets, having stripped off their headscarves in direct protest to the regime.

To start, these protests were obviously centered around women’s rights and the repressive laws espoused by the regime. Because of the regime’s mandatory veiling laws, along with a host of other discriminatory laws, Jina Amini’s death resonated with women across Iran and the world. During Jina Amini’s funeral, women in attendance began to chant “Woman, Life, Freedom” and removed their headscarves, while people all around the country took to the streets, “outraged over the slew of social ills symbolized in Amini’s death-the subjugation of women, the repression of minorities, religious chauvinism, police brutality, and government corruption” (Zeidan, 2024). These protests occurred widely, having struck a chord with a large portion of the country as well as the international diaspora. An investigation undertaken by an Iranian non-profit organization called Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI) found that the protests occurred in 31 provinces, 160 cities, and 143 major universities within Iran, not counting the

massive international reactions to Amini's death (HRAI, 2024). These protests intensified for several months, fueled by Amini's death and anger over the state's reaction to the movement.

Jina Amini's death was unjust, as were the deaths of hundreds of protestors in the aftermath of her death. These protests led to the deaths of at least 530 individuals" as a result of violent repercussions by the "anti-riot police and Iran's militia force (Basij)" (Ibid). In reaction to these massive protests, the Iranian government, in various forms of law enforcement, violently cracked down, employing such anti-protest methods as teargas and live ammunition, injuring and oftentimes killing protestors. On one such occasion, a day now referred to as "Bloody Friday" or the "Zahedan Massacre" at the end of September 2022, Iranian security forces employed unlawful lethal force on a group of protestors, marking the most protestors killed in a single day during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement: at least 12 people were killed and 30 were wounded on that single day (*Iran: 'Bloody Friday' Crackdown This Year's Deadliest*, 2022). Between September 30th and October 5, Iranian police and intelligence forces continued to open fire on protestors around prayer halls and mosques, and in that time period, between 85 and 97 people were killed (Ibid). This incredible display of state brutality brought the nature of these protests to light; it highlighted not only the regime's willingness to employ lethal violence to suppress dissent but the courage of the Iranian people to continue the fight. As these protests intensified, and the death toll ticked upwards, a global outcry emerged, fueling a collective movement for justice, the empowerment of women, and democracy.

One caveat of researching the Iranian state crackdowns on these protests is that most international and independent media are barred from reporting inside Iran, so most of the accessible statistics are simple estimates. So, while there is not an official death toll, Iran's Human Rights Activists News Agency estimated in September 2023 that at least 530 protestors

had been killed by security forces (*Iran: A Really Simple Guide to the Protests*, 2023).

Furthermore, these protests also yielded an incredible amount of arrests and imprisonments.

According to HRAI estimates, at least “18,242 protesters were arrested”, out of which HRAI has confirmed the identity of “3,670 arrested citizens, 605 students and 61 journalists or activists” (HRAI, 2024). In all, over 20,000 protestors were arrested, with the majority of their fates in state custody unknown.

The street protests seen during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement are pivotal to the broader context of Iranian women’s activism. Fueled by the tragic death of Jina Amini, these active street protests, of which Iranian women were at the forefront, served as a highly powerful and visible platform for women to demand justice. These protests underscored not only the urgent need for social and political change in Iran, but the critical importance of women’s voices in catalyzing and shaping that change.

Student Demonstrations

One interesting result of Amini’s death was the activation of an unprecedented demographic: schoolgirls. As street protests raged in most major cities in Iran, female students from elementary school to college began showing their solidarity. Iranian schools became hubs of civil disobedience and female student activism, adding a new dimension to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. While this topic has not been formally researched, and reliable data is not necessarily retrievable, it is important to caveat that the information analyzed in this subsection was consolidated from articles describing interviews with Iranian students, photos and videos of student demonstrations, and other more informally-written stories from within Iran.

Speaking generally, the first recorded student demonstration of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement was on September 18, just two days after Jina Amini’s death. Students at

Tehran University's College of Fine Arts gathered and lit candles in Amini's memory. Then, on September 19, students, female and male alike, gathered at the Amirkabir University in Tehran, protesting Amini's unjust death at the hands of the state and systematic oppression in the country, and were consequently attacked by Basij militia forces. Multiple other universities saw similar protests and state repression. By September 20th, student protests had sparked across the nation.

Violent state repression continued:

On September 21, after holding a protest rally in Tehran University, 30 students were arrested as they were leaving the campus, followed by arrests at other universities, carried out by the security forces, who raided the homes of students.

On September 24, the USTUC reported that officers fired pellets during a student gathering at Tehran University. Officers initially blocked the university's gate at 16 Azar Street to prevent students from entering and then brutally attacked with batons, arresting about 30 to 40 students and putting them into six vans. (*Students Violently Attacked, Arrested by Security Forces as Protests in Iran Spread, 2022*)

Clearly, these student movements instilled fear in the Iranian government. As of October 1, 2022, less than a month into the movement, students at 111 universities had joined the national student movement by boycotting classes. Sit-ins at the university level also became very common (Ibid).

Most relevantly to this thesis, however, is the ways in which female students specifically contributed to or led demonstrations. Female students were present and protesting at all of the demonstrations listed above, but these demonstrations are not the only ones they specifically led. As Iranian women, female students particularly resonated with the death of Jina Amini, which occurred as a result of the unjust mandatory veiling laws in place in Iran. One prominent example of female student activism took place on November 1, 2022; in the northeastern city of Sanandaj, female students at the Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences were filmed "waving their headscarves in the air to chants of 'Woman, Life, Freedom'" (Gritten, 2022). Iranian women are uniquely positioned, as hijabi Muslims, to leverage their religious expression as a

form of political activism against the state; as female students, they are also uniquely positioned to demonstrate as members of educational institutions, which might allow them more freedoms and securities than demonstrating on the street.

Another story, published in *The New Yorker* in August 2023, discusses an even younger demographic: high school girls. In winter 2022, students at a girls' high school in Tehran were informed that government officials would be coming to the school to check compliance with the dress code, "specifically, the wearing of the *maghnaeh*, a hooded veil that became a requirement for schoolgirls in the years after the Iranian Revolution" (Moaveni, 2023). When the officials came to the school and gathered the girls outside, one of the girls "raised her arm...and then she and the others pulled off their head scarves and tossed them on the ground" (Ibid). The next day, nearly every girl in school came to class without a head scarf. This illustrates that not only were female students aware and supportive of the protests raging outside their classrooms, but they understood the profundity of the action of taking off one's headscarf: "refusing to wear the veil had become a symbol of the movement", and these schoolgirls knew the consequences of perpetuating this symbol (Ibid).

Dozens of videos and photos were posted online throughout the duration of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, showing schoolgirls demonstrating both in their schools and in the streets, chanting the slogan of the movement, stripping off their hijabs and burning them in public, and protesting directly against the Basij militia forces and other law enforcement. Female students expelled government officials from their schools, scrawled protest slogans—"Woman, life, freedom" and "Death to the dictator"—on their desks and walls, tore out pages with the portraits of past and present Supreme Leaders from their textbooks, and wrote letters to officials (Ibid).

Just as Iranian women activists were being arrested on the streets of Iran, Iranian schoolgirls too faced consequences. Discussed earlier were statistics regarding the quantity of protestors who were arrested during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement; according to the deputy commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, the average age of most people detained during the protests was 15 (Van Esveld & Sajadi, 2022). On a more dire note, female students have also been targeted and killed by state security forces. One schoolgirl, Nika Shakarami, was 16 when she took part in demonstrations by burying her headscarf; she was last seen alive on September 20, and the government claimed she fell from a building (Ibid). Another case in which the government made the same claim to her fate was Sarin Esmailzadeh, also 16 (Ibid).

The final point to touch on with regards to female student demonstrations was the widespread regime response to schoolgirl participation. Starting in November 2022, schoolgirls were targeted by airborne poison attacks while at school; the first attack took place on November 30, when 18 girls from the Nour Technical School had to be taken to the hospital (Rajvanshi, 2023). Since then, over 1,000 schoolgirls have been poisoned in what some have called acts of “biological terror” (Tizhoosh, 2023). Many of those affected have suffered such symptoms as respiratory problems, nausea, dizziness, and fatigue, and several students even died (Rajvanshi, 2023). These attacks are alleged by prominent women activists in Iran as an intentional act of revenge by the regime ““against the brave women who reject the forced hijab”” (Alinejad, 2024; Tizhoosh, 2023). Because these young girls are at the forefront of these anti-regime protests, it is widely believed that the regime initiated these poison attacks as a way to deter girls from protesting: ““They don’t want to admit it publicly like the Taliban, but they’re using terror tactics to scare girls from unveiling at their schools”” (Ibid).

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement called to action a large cross-section of Iranian society, but none more so surprising than Iranian schoolgirls and university students. This particular demographic became pivotal to the movement and reflected not only the younger generation’s rejection of oppressive mandates but also a growing awareness of the power of collective resistance. In a country where asserting one’s autonomy as a woman can lead to fatal consequences, the courage displayed by these schoolgirls in their fight for freedom and equality is truly incredible. Despite facing severe repercussions, including arrests and targeted attacks, these students have demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination. Their willingness to confront state authority and challenge the status quo inspires hope for a more just and equal future in Iran.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Activism

In researching this topic, another highly prevalent strategy of activism that Iranian women in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement have leveraged to their advantage has been the deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs). For at least the past decade, Iranian women activists have used the Internet and its accompanying technologies, including social media, television, and smartphones, to “spread their message, recruit supporters, and draw international attention to their cause” (Gheytanchi & Moghadam, 2014, p. 2). Beyond this, and especially relevant to the context of Iran, these ICTs and the global accessibility they offer have allowed women to “circumvent state media control and censorship” and cultivate domestic and transnational networks of support and information-sharing (Ibid., 2). In a country with tightly-controlled state media and widespread citizen censorship, ICT activism became

particularly relevant and critical from the very beginning of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.

As discussed earlier, Jina Amini’s death at the hands of the Iranian regime sparked the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, a movement that spread across Iran and the world. What channels and methods facilitated the rapid dissemination of information about the conditions of her death? How did this occur in a country so limited by state censorship? It all began with a video shared to social media that showed Jina Amini collapsing at the police station after she had been arrested and detained. She had been beaten after her arrest, and this video allegedly shows her succumbing to her injuries. After this video, Amini fell into a 3-day coma and ultimately died in the hospital. When Iranian citizens, and the international community, saw this video, they were moved to action. Without this video, or the photo of Amini in the hospital during her coma, the world may not have learned of her death or the conditions that permitted it.

This is a common thread throughout the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. In broad strokes, Iran is notoriously difficult to research; information from within Iran, especially in the sphere of demographics and political dissent, is very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. This movement was no different. Without the accessibility of ICTs, people both within Iran and outside would be blind to the events occurring within Iran:

Despite government restrictions on major social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook in Iran, the escalating clashes between demonstrators and government forces in recent years have underscored the key role of online social media platforms in sparking public movements and disseminating news. Instagram, however, remains accessible through VPNs, facilitating the sharing of images, news, and videos during protests, thus relying heavily on digital evidence. It is within this context that the Woman, Life, Freedom movement gained traction, leveraging the impact of social media. (Izadi & Dryden, 2024, p. 3)

A prominent example of ICTs as avoidance of state censorship was the case of “Bloody Friday”, or the “Zahedan Massacre”, which was discussed earlier in the context of protestor deaths.

Without the documentation brought forward by Haalvvsh, an Iranian human rights organization, the Human Rights Watch would never have been able to report on the violent state crackdown. In that particular case, the Human Rights Watch was able to verify over 52 videos and photographs as a form of open-source research in order to figure out what was happening and how many protesters had been killed or injured (*Iran: 'Bloody Friday' Crackdown This Year's Deadliest*, 2022). Not only did ICTs allow for real-time updates on protests and law enforcement crackdowns, but it validated the experiences of the people within Iran on a global scale. In essence, the photos and videos taken within Iran and subsequently circulated online brought not only *awareness*, but *legitimacy* to the events occurring within the country, both to Iranian citizens and the rest of the world. Without this documentation, and the accessibility of this documentation brought on by the global reach of the internet, there potentially would be no “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement at all.

When Iranian women used the media at their disposal during this movement, they were able to broaden their access not only to the domestic political sphere, but the international one. This is a democratizing process, one that widens “the discursive space through the language of liberalism, individualism and autonomy, secularism, and Islamic feminism” (Moghadam & Sadiqi, 2006, p. 3). Women’s participation in political activism via media, including print media, films, and social media platforms, provided a “voice and a platform for the dissemination of women’s issues” (Ibid., 3).

Furthermore, ICTs, particularly social media, have completely changed the way that women can participate in political activism. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X can be leveraged to spread and amplify the message of the movement; this was evident with hashtag campaigns that corresponded with earlier movements like White Wednesdays

(#WhiteWednesdays) and the Girls of Revolution Street (#GirlsofRevolutionStreet). With the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, hashtags like #MahsaAmini and #IranRevolution2022 globally trended (Dagres & Jones, 2022). These hashtags were a very accessible way for Iranian women to show support for the cause, participate in digital activism, and spread their messages. Hashtag campaigns like these empowered Iranian women to express themselves online in a space where they wouldn’t be beaten or disappeared. This avenue of political activism allowed them to challenge the values of their country, vocalize their demands, and show the world the brutality of the Iranian regime (Fathollahzadeh, 2024).

Overall, the use of ICTs as a form of Iranian women’s activism allowed for greater connectivity and mobilization and cultivated greater civic engagement throughout the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. This strategy of activism countered Iranian censorship and provided women with an accessible avenue of political participation in an authoritarian state that actively works to cut off the flow of information. With the advent and accessibility of ICTs, Iranian women have been able to access and share more news and information, take advantage of unprecedented visibility, and disseminate their message on a global scale, accelerating the momentum of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.

Electoral Boycotts

One less prominent form of women’s activism during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement was electoral boycotts. Iranian electoral processes are generally understood to be democratically illegitimate, a fact that has permeated the Iranian psyche and contributed to civil unrest and women’s activism. The design of these electoral processes essentially sideline opposition voices and prevent women from running. In March 2024, Iran planned to hold its first round of parliamentary elections, only the 12th time since 1979 that Iranians would be able to

vote for their representatives (Tajali, 2024). Months before these protests, prominent women activists, like 2023 Nobel Peace Laureate Narges Mohammadi advocated for a boycott of these elections, calling them a “sham” following the “ruthless and brutal suppression” of the 2022 protests (Gritten, 2024).

The Iranian government, and particularly the parliament, have played significant roles in the legal and systemic oppression of women via policy, especially regarding mandatory veiling, both prior and in the aftermath of the 2022 movement. As such, the Iranian regime draws a large part of its international legitimacy from its elections, as many authoritarian governments do. Many officials, including the Supreme Leader, continued to urge their citizens to vote, linking turnout to taking a stand against Iran’s enemies or making it a “glorious day for the nation” (*First Iranian Parliament Vote since 2022 Mass Protests...*, 2024). Elections project a semblance of democratic processes to the international community, manage internal competition among the political and social elite, and they offer a strictly regimented outlet for citizen demands that “might otherwise trigger protest” (Tabaar, 2024). The activism during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement threatened the Iranian regime and its stability, so by combining these calls for voter participation with a conflict management system, the regime hoped to maintain its international legitimacy, bolster its reputation, and ensure its own security.

Despite this, the voter turnout eventually was reported as one of the lowest in Iran’s history at just 40.6% (Gritten, 2024). Although it wasn’t immediately clear whether Iranian voters were just generally disenfranchised with the political system or if they wanted to actively send a message to the regime, it is clear that women activists around Iran advocated for this boycott. Iranian women have very few powers and privileges as citizens of Iran. One of the few

rights they maintain as citizens is their right to vote, so by avoiding voting, they are not only withholding that power for themselves, but they are denying the regime its legitimacy.

This electoral boycott led to some interesting electoral results during the 2024 presidential election as well, which occurred after late president Ebrahim Raisi died in a helicopter crash in May 2024. Similar to the parliamentary elections of March 2024, the June/July 2024 presidential election experienced the true lowest turnout in Iran's history at just 39.9%, again a result of widespread citizen disenfranchisement and electoral boycott. Ultimately, the regime was unable to push its desired candidate to success, and were forced to "rally behind a relatively obscure member of parliament named Masoud Pezeshkian", who only won with around 53.7% of the vote (Tabaar, 2024). This is significantly lower than the normal electoral results, which typically see the regime's desired candidates securing around "70% of the vote with 80% turnout" (Ibid). Of course, during the presidential debates, Pezeshkian affirmed that he did not support the institutionalization of the mandatory hijab, but not that he is in power, he and the rest of the regime have implemented "more stringent enforcement mechanisms, monitoring, and penalties (Ibid).

Iranian women have boycotted these elections for good reason. They have become widely disillusioned with the regime and its supposed representation and protection of the Iranian people; the crackdown on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests illustrated the degree to which the regime would go to quash dissent. In short, Iranians, and particularly Iranian women, learned that the government would imprison and murder activists in cold blood to maintain power and control. For that, Iranian women activists took control over one of the only remaining things over which they had control: their voting power. By avoiding the ballot box and

withholding their vote, they expressed their discontent for the entire political system and reiterated their demands for autonomy and self-determination.

Reenactments

Throughout the duration of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, Iranian women participated in reenactments and acts of solidarity, one of the most striking and iconic forms of activism during this movement. After Jina Amini’s death, Iranian women marched through the streets and publicly removed their hijabs as an act of solidarity to Amini and other women like her who were targeted and killed or arrested by the state for improper veiling. If not in the streets, this took place in the digital space, with women continuing the sentiments of the “My Stealthy Freedom” movement and posting photographs or videos of themselves without the hijab. This too occurred on university campuses and on high school grounds around the country; the act of removing one’s hijab became not only a symbol of this particular movement, but of the greater current of women activists and their demands for the Iranian future.

In traditional Iranian culture, when women are in mourning, they cut off their hair to display their grief. During the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, Iranian women would chop off their hair not only to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, but to transform this traditional sign of grief into a sign of rage and protest, “hacking their own hair and sharing the footage on social media platforms” (Karimi, 2024). Again, a large reason that this form of activism was so prominent and effective in spreading the message of the movement was that a) it was easy to participate in and b) women could just post their participation online without the immediate, physical fear of arrest or death at the hands of the state.

Another act of reenactment that took place during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement was a particular stance that mimicked the posture of the Baluchi activist Khodanoor

Lojei. He was “seated on the ground, body bent forward, head bowed, hands tied around a pole” and “left to die, without water, in the blistering heat” during the Zahedan Massacre in September 2022 (Ibid). His death added fuel to the fire; the stance in which he died was replicated numerous times by women activists on university campuses in Iran and then around the globe. This pose was replicated especially in November 2022 on the fortieth day of mourning after the Zahedan Massacre, or “Bloody Friday”, as tribute to those killed on that day as well as Lojei and activists like her who had been targeted by the Iranian regime.

Reenactments have been so powerful during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement because not only are they reproductions of past events, but they are “bold, site-specific performances in public spaces, often imbued with political intent” (Ibid). Each reenactment has its own context, and for women activists in Iran during the last two years, each reenactment is an act of solidarity tying a community of women activists together. Each act builds on the last tragedy or horror facing Iranian women and activists, serving as “a means of remembrance and resistance against tyranny” (Ibid). These acts are direct challenges to the authorities cracking down on them, and they lean into this nature of political insensitivity.

Impact of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

One of the final questions to answer in this thesis, then, is as follows: what was the result of all of the efforts of Iranian women throughout this movement? There are two clear ways to answer this question. The first part of this section examines the Iranian government’s response and the current status of Iranian women and girls, as of October 2024, in the context of “Woman, Life, Freedom”. The second part examines the deeper meaning of the “Woman, Life, Freedom”

movement and the regime's response to it, highlighting the more intangible impacts of this movement.

The first several months of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement were extremely intense. Since the apex of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in December 2022, street protests have become more sporadic. The primary protests for this particular movement generally occur on the anniversary of Jina Amini's death each September when Iranian citizens, female and male alike, march through the streets in her memory. Despite the sporadicism of the protests, the sentiments remain; Iranian women want freedom, equality, and justice in all dimensions of their lives. The two-year anniversary of Amini's death was in September of this year; since her death, Iranian activists continue to endure the devastating crackdown on the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, a burden that falls primarily on Iranian women.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that despite international participation in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement and awareness of the brutal violence perpetrated by the Iranian regime, there have been no criminal investigations into the serious human rights violations committed by the state during this movement. Jina Amini was unfortunately not the first, nor the last, Iranian woman to be targeted and murdered by the state; the list grows longer of activists wrongfully imprisoned, arbitrarily detained, unjustly persecuted, and relentlessly harassed.

Two years on, Iranian authorities have not only continued their crackdown on activism, but have implemented new methods of subjugation and repression against women, particularly as it relates to the mandatory hijab. In April 2024, the Iranian regime launched a nationwide program called the “Noor Plan”, which increased security and law enforcement mechanisms for compulsory veiling (*Iran: Two Years After 'Woman Life Freedom' Uprising...*, 2024). In other

words, this campaign has implemented an even wider-scale apparatus that enforces the mandatory hijab and paves the way for the regime to criminalize even more Iranian women. This campaign also allows law enforcement to prevent women from driving by chasing them down on the road, confiscating their vehicles, and enforcing other punishments like imprisonment, flogging, and other torturous penalties (Ibid). Furthermore, the Iranian regime has deployed the use of facial recognition technology to enforce its various oppressive laws against women, “resulting in the closure of numerous restaurants, shops, and even pharmacies who served uncovered women” (Parsa, 2023).

Iranian women and girls continue to be attacked in the streets. For example, in August 2024, a video disseminated on social media showed multiple law enforcement agents assaulting two young teen girls who had removed their headscarves; one of the girls, when interviewed, said that “one female agent hit [her], put her knee on [her] throat, and hit [her] head hard” (*Iran: Two Years After ‘Woman Life Freedom’ Uprising...*, 2024). This war on women is just that: an assault on women and girls who are empowering themselves and each other and claiming their human rights to “freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, religion, belief, and autonomy” (Ibid).

Despite the waves of protests and demonstrations throughout this movement, the same governmental entities have maintained, and even gained, power to enforce these discriminatory laws: the morality police, the Revolutionary Guards, the traffic police, prosecution offices, courts, and the Ministry of Intelligence. This is only exacerbated by the near adoption of the “Bill to Support the Culture of Chastity and Hijab”, which essentially legalizes these entities’ assault on women and girls who defy compulsory veiling (*Iran’s Noor Plan Intensifies Crackdown on Women*, 2024). This bill aims to disincentivize political activism and

self-expression for Iranian women and girls. This enhanced means of enforcing this mandatory dress code is a continuum of a long history of discriminatory laws policing women's autonomy, which historically has only led to more civil unrest and disobedience.

Another horrible result of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement has been the increased use of the death penalty. In 2023, Iran experienced the highest number of executions in the last eight years: “the authorities resorted to use of the death penalty as a tool of oppression to terrorize the public” (*Iran: Two Years After ‘Woman Life Freedom’ Uprising...*, 2024). After sham trials based on confessions extracted under torture or sexual violence, women activists like Sharifeh Mohammadi and Pakhshan Azizi are being convicted of “armed rebellion against the state” and sentenced to death, “solely due to their peaceful activism” (Ibid). The Iranian regime continues to deepen this systematic subjugation of its female citizens who refuse to stay silent; it continues to evade justice and international law. In March 2024, for example, the late president created the “Special Committee for Examining the Unrest of 2022” as a method of covering up his regime's actions during the movement (Ibid). Of course, this committee claimed the state had acted responsibly, which is a blatant lie.

Iranian women continue to struggle within the context of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, underscoring their relentless pursuit of justice and autonomy in the face of severe repression. The regime has systematically attempted to quash dissent and enforce compliance through fear. As women activists continue to face subjugation and harsh penalties, it is clear that the values espoused in “Woman, Life, Freedom” is not just a matter of personal freedom but a collective resistance against a regime that seeks to silence empowered female voices.

From a birds-eye view, the Iranian regime's response to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement has greatly worsened the conditions and quality of life for Iranian women. They are

persecuted at every turn for daring to show their hair in public, and they live in fear of retaliation for expressing themselves. Reading between the lines, however, illuminates a glaring fact: the Iranian government and status quo were profoundly threatened by the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. For the first time in at least a decade, the Iranian government was forced to face the collective power of its populace and stare their oppressed subjects in the eye.

Despite the brutal state response to this movement, women continue their acts of peaceful civil disobedience. The Center for Human Rights in Iran called this a “quiet revolution”, in which Iranian women continue to refuse to wear the mandatory hijab, the “symbol of Islamic Republic oppression” (*A Quiet Revolution Continues in Iran...*, 2024). When they remove their hijabs, these women are saying no: “no to the repression, no to the violence, and no to the systematic discrimination and gender apartheid that has characterized the plight of women in the Islamic Republic since its inception” (Ibid). And yet they stand firm. Two years later, Iranian women continue to uncover their hair and walk the streets of Iran, a symbol of their lasting defiance.

Conclusion

Iranian women have overcome systemic oppression and a repressive status quo to build a strong presence as political activists and agents of change. Iranian women’s participation and leadership in protest movements is not new; rather, there is a long history of women’s activism in Iran dating back to the start of the twentieth century. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement is simply a continuation of this history, albeit an unprecedented, powerful and globally visible continuation.

In past decades, the subjugation and oppression of Iranian women has been largely invisible, but the 2022 movement highlighted not only an unprecedented visibility of women's issues in Iran, but new methods of activism in pursuit of women's rights, equality, and justice. Traditional street protests reigned supreme, but for one of the first times in Iranian modern history, schoolgirls participated in school-based demonstrations; women took advantage of social media and digital spaces to spread their messages and stories; women boycotted both parliamentary and presidential elections; and women took part in reenactments as acts of solidarity with their fellow activists. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement illuminated the myriad of strategies that Iranian women have at their disposal to pursue and participate in political activism despite their restrictive environment. As Mehran Kamrava highlights in his article "From misogyny to security: women and the state in Iran", the self-empowerment and collective activism of women pose a direct security threat to the Iranian regime. Their resistance during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement solidified their position as disruptors of the status quo; Iranian women have made themselves visible and forced the regime to hear their dissent, compelling the state to respond with increasing repression. Their activism contests the power and authority of the state, and has positioned them as pivotal actors in the fight for a more democratic and just society.

Future research on Iranian women's activism, both during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and beyond, could explore an extended historical context of Iran, particularly at the intersection of religion, politics, and culture. This could situate Iran's modern political state within the broader regional context as a Persian nation in the Arab / Islamic world. Future research could also explore future courses of action or predictions as to the result of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, as well as what it would take to make long-term social and political

change to improve the status of Iranian women. Delving into the long-term impact of women's activism on Iranian socio-political structures, such as shifts in gender norms or a move towards secularism, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the legacy of "Woman, Life, Freedom". Furthermore, a more in-depth, formal political analysis of the Iranian authoritarian regime and the mechanisms it uses to stay in power could provide better insights into why Iranian women continue to be subjugated. Finally, a better acknowledgement and exploration of intersectionality in Iranian women's activism and highlighting such groups as Kurdish and Baluchi women could provide a more well-rounded analysis of the movement and its supporters.

Ultimately, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement has left an indelible mark on Iranian society and the international community. This movement has created a generation of young Iranian women activists confident in their values and voices; cultivated a sense of camaraderie and fellowship among women activists; and reminded both the Iranian regime and the Iranian people of the power of collective resistance, something that will not soon be forgotten in the wake of "Woman, Life, Freedom".

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