

Power, Pictures, and Protest: The Dynamics of Resistance and Repression in
Iranian Women's Digital Visual Activism

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy, Political Science

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Since 2014, digital image-sharing has formed a core practice of protest for Iranian women. As a part of this practice, women share pictures of themselves partaking in legally prohibited acts - such as being unveiled, dancing, singing, or cycling - on social media, demonstrating defiance to the regime's "public morality laws" which tightly regulate women's appearance and behavior in public space. I argue that this form of protest disrupts core mechanisms of authoritarian gender control such as discourses on women's societal roles and the tools of repression - fear, isolation, and the threat of violence - used to enforce compliance to the gender order. Since the beginning of the 1979 Revolution, gender has underlaid key aspects of the Islamic Republic's ideological foundations - further rendering gender-based challenges a pronounced threat. This dissertation shows how women systematically undo the Iranian regime's material and ideological tools of control using subversive images, bringing new insights to questions of power, resistance, and agency in the context of twenty-first century authoritarian regimes. By leveraging social media affordances of visibility, hybrid presence, diffusion, and alternative world-making, I show how women engage a new "repertoire of protest" towards the creation of an alternative gender order based on joy, equality, and free expression. The visions and practices undergirding this gender order gradually take to, and over, public space - undermining key divisions between the private-public spheres which have long constrained women's presence. Using large-scale image, discourse, and matrix analysis, I trace the emergence of what I term "visual protest movements," which overcome the barriers to mobilization in authoritarian regimes while provoking structural

challenges to state power, explaining why they are often met with intense repression. I show how digital image-sharing takes shape around the dynamics of resistance and repression in women's struggles for liberation, while scaling individual acts into collective movements reshaping the very structures they confront, adding new considerations on how marginalized subjects employ creativity in their interactions with digital tools to further their demands.

PREFACE

In late 2019, a mere six months after having finalized a version of this dissertation research for my department's "second year paper" – their rendition of a Master's thesis – a series of mass protests erupted across Iran. Sparked by a sudden increase in gas prices, the Aban (November) Uprising became the most significant challenge to the regime since the 2009 Green Movement, resulting in the deaths of at least 1,500 people. Around the same time, U.S. forces assassinated Qassem Soleimani, a top IRGC commander, before the Iranian regime responded haphazardly, downing a civilian plane which killed all 176 passengers and crewmembers on board. Alongside grief, Iranians both inside and outside of the country also became gripped by the fear that these events might trigger a full-scale war.

That war never materialized but a mere two months later, Iranians began falling ill to a novel coronavirus that claimed dozens of lives within the first few weeks alone. Between checking infection rates in Eugene and Iran, I would soon learn that the regime's intolerance for Western intrusion and its own mismanaged response to the health crisis would lead to the premature deaths of thousands more, including some friends and relatives. In the face of false claims, travel bans, and distant losses, we grieved some more.

Then, in 2022, came news that a young woman had died after falling into a coma while in the custody of Iran's "morality police" for alleged hijab violations. The anger underlying what had, by then, become a tragically familiar occurrence cascaded into yet another series of protests across Iran. Over the next two years, thousands were arrested, and more than 1,400 were killed or executed, solidifying a pattern among Iranians between grief and outrage.

Iranians like to say that we are used to bad news. But what the past few years have truly revealed to me are the strength and resilience required in the process of normalizing the abnormal – of continuing to go about your day as if nothing were happening. Behind closed doors, agony and grief pervade the Iranian consciousness. Like all those facing atrocities in Palestine, Sudan, Congo, Myanmar, and the rest of the global “periphery” as I write this, we have found our space for mourning shrinking, rarely allowed to process one loss before another arrives. We rather tend to bear these moments in silence or release them in bursts of collective rage when the moment allows.

And yet, in the pauses between silence and rage, there is a great deal of creative resistance, asserting agency against seemingly insurmountable power structures. This dissertation is an examination of one such form of creativity, appearing in how Iranian women challenge and resist public morality laws like the compulsory hijab. By combining the power of visuality with social media, Iranian women reveal the ways marginalized, subjugated, and colonized subjects assert power over their lives using everyday (and unexpected) tools and technologies. They demonstrate the power of creative practices to force change under authoritarian power structures, and how such resistance can occur without mass mobilization in the streets, or even women’s co-presence in time and space.

A dear friend and mentor, Anita Chari, once told me that you write the dissertation for yourself. More than anyone else, it contains the message that you most need to hear. The creativity and resilience at the heart of this dissertation thus mirror my own as I navigated countless bad news, heartache, and dread – emotions all too common to the Iranian psyche. In the following section, I offer thanks to all those who encouraged me to keep writing when I felt overcome by such emotions, reminding me that this, too, was a creative act of resistance.

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This dissertation is first and foremost the outcome of years of conversation, collaborative brainstorming, and back-and-forth revisions with Erin Beck. She dedicated countless hours of labor – more importantly, her life – to seeing this project through, and I feel that no amount of gratitude suffices for her contributions to my work. Erin, I am truly grateful to have had you as my advisor and I hope you see yourself across these pages as much as I do.

To the remaining members of my committee: thank you for the patience, encouragement, and grace you bestowed upon me as I worked through endless drafts and ideas. I could not have anticipated how seamlessly each of your expertise would come together in shaping the core foundations of my research. Gerry, this is truly your baby. I hope you are proud of what is now the result of a conversation in your office back in 2019, digging to see what I was really interested in. Your questions never failed to push me beyond the commonsensical – a training that has benefited this project at each turn. Tuong grew my appreciation for ideology and nourished an early interest in revolutions that laid the groundwork for the historical analysis of this dissertation. He was also a kind and consistent mentor despite my many shortcomings. Since meeting Jillian virtually – and then in-person in Amman in 2022 – I have learned to just sit back and absorb the wealth of knowledge she has on the Middle East. I thus considered myself truly fortunate when she agreed to join my committee – without her, my thinking on resistance and space would not have developed as fully or as critically. Anita’s contributions on women’s movements, gender, and the hijab added considerable depth to my work. She was also a steadfast ally during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, helping to create vital spaces for scholarly engagement with the uprising. I am grateful to each of you for being a part of my journey and for fine-tuning the pieces of this dissertation in ways that do justice to its aims – and to the women at its core.

Additionally, my work has benefitted from the support of a number of organizations, conferences, and grants, without which the ideas here would have suffered a great deal of rigor and depth. The University of Oregon’s Center for the Study of Women in Society supported my work on two occasions, significantly advancing its development. Equally valuable were the intellectual and professional connections that emerged from that support. Two grants from the Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (SYLFF) and a fellowship from the American Association of University Women afforded me the time and space to focus exclusively on my research, ultimately facilitating the publication of a peer-reviewed article. The American Political Science Association (APSA) – and particularly its MENA Section – was also a formidable part of my journey, supporting my participation in two conferences in Jordan and Lebanon where I gained valuable insights and formed lasting relationships with some of my closest colleagues.

Across the globe, I have been sustained and encouraged by friends and family whose support kept me grounded and committed to this work. Katie Temple, Alex Farrington, Raha Nobowati, Hoda Sobhani, Mariam Nadeem, Pooria Manoochehri, Saba Moslehi, and Mona Jabbari were my family far from home during my time in Eugene. As my first adventure partner, Kelley Zamora taught me what it really means to embrace my roots and evolved my worldview with new forms of knowledge that continue to inspire my curiosity. Michael Murashige entered this project when I needed him the most, giving me the confidence to call myself a writer, and Taravat Khalili reminded me of my dedication to the causes I care about, both on paper and in the streets.

Mauricio Mendoza, Grecia Gamundi, Juan Pablo Huerta, Fernanda Huerta, Adrián Zanatta, and Aldo Martínez showed me what it means to find your “people.” Mau – thank you for opening your world to me and for challenging my ideas at each turn; I am infinitely better because of it. To

the rest of the crew: I feel endless gratitude for knowing people who show me what it means to make the world a better – and more fun – place to be in. I hope life reflects back to you the same lightness and sense of adventure you’ve brought to mine these last few years.

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Like any production, a dissertation is only as good as the actors – both big and small – that help bring it to completion. To every academic, activist, student worker, laborer, barista, and taquero who helped nourish me both mentally and physically over the years, I am eternally grateful. Special thanks to the amazing folks at Manū and Niddo for sustaining me with delicious coffee and food as I turned your tables into temporary offices for weeks on end. I am also indebted to the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF), my student union, for all their tireless advocacy in ensuring I lived a dignified life while laboring around this project.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, for making the Revolution make sense.

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In Iran, women are like islands. They generally lack institutional spaces where they can interact with one another. If they want such spaces, they must create them.

-- Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On April 1, 2023, CCTV footage from a local shop in Mashhad, Iran, went viral on social media after showing a disturbing encounter between a bystander and a young woman around the country's compulsory hijab mandate. The video – unclear whether released by the shop owner or the victim – depicts the moment when the bystander enters the store to confront the woman about her lack of hijab, visible by the headscarf hanging loosely around her neck. After a brief argument, the man grabs a tub of yogurt from a nearby refrigerator and dumps it over the woman's head, as well as on the veiled woman accompanying her. In response, a man behind the counter – presumably the shopkeeper – rushes forward and physically confronts the attacker, pushing him out of the store. Two male customers also quickly follow to intervene, though one is pulled back by a woman accompanying him, tugging at his shirt to dissuade his involvement.

Within forty-eight hours of the video circulating on social media, the head of Iran's judiciary announced that the two women in the footage – described as a mother and daughter – had been identified and arrested for violating the country's mandatory hijab laws (Esfandiari 2023). The shop owner had also detained, and his store shut down for failing to enforce compliance with hijab regulations, while the assailant was said to have been briefly taken into custody for “disturbing public order” (2023).

On social media, users widely condemned the incident by sharing footage of the metal bars covering the entrance of the shop where it had reportedly taken place. Others circulated images of

“Hajarpour” yogurt – the kind used in the assault – as a gesture of solidarity with the victims and a satirical rebuke of the attacker (X.com/Javanmardi75, 4/1/23). One widely shared post condemned the attacker in taking away people’s sense of normalcy. Detailing the everyday rhythms of the scene – the shopkeeper busy at work, women wearing a headscarf, appearing without it, or donning a chador (the full-body cloak often associated with religious conservatism), and others seemingly indifferent to what others wore – the user suggested that the real disruption came not from the women’s dress, but from those who, emboldened by the state’s surveillance apparatus, seek to police women’s public presence (X.com/SaraMassoumi, 4/1/23). Meanwhile, other reports shared that a former member of Mashhad’s city council had shown residents sending flowers to the shop in support of the owner who had intervened on behalf of the targeted women (Esfandiari 2023).

As part of the state’s broader crackdown, then-President Ebrahim Raisi went on to reaffirm the hijab as “a religious necessity” with no room for compromise on such a “legal matter” (Esfandiari 2023). The Interior Ministry echoed this stance, declaring that despite months of public defiance by women refusing to wear the hijab, “there would be no retreat or tolerance of the issue” (Usher 2023). A hardline member of parliament went even further, threatening to escalate pressure on the judiciary within forty-eight hours for failing to impose harsher legal penalties to dissuade hijab violators, despite prolonged deliberations already underway (2023). Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had the last word, reiterating four days later that wearing the hijab was a “legal, Islamic boundary” while insisting that abandoning it was not “politically permissible” (Khamenei.Ir 2023). Repeating long-standing state rhetoric, he denounced what he described as “Western plots carried out under the pretext of women’s issues,” and accused foreign intelligence agencies of orchestrating such incidents to sow division within Iran (2023).

This example is one of thousands which have emerged in recent years, implicating women's fights for bodily autonomy and free expression in a web of images and surrounding discourses subverting, or upholding, the laws and violent practices enforcing so-called "public morality." Typically, a provocative picture or video – showing individual(s) engaged in morally banned activities, demonstrating support for those doing so, or recording the harassment and violence which often precedes enforcement – circulates online, drawing public attention. Inspired by the depiction, others then engage with it discursively through posts and comments, or share their own rendition of contentious acts, repeating or innovating new strategies around what they see as resistance to the regime. For their part, state forces mobilize a repressive response combining the discursive, practical, and forceful elements of their arsenal to dismantle these waves of protest, preventing further rebellions from surfacing.

For a high-capacity authoritarian regime that has, for the most part, swiftly "repressed or purged any internal factions that could challenge it," the actions depicted across such images should, in theory, pose little concern (Parsa 2020, 66). Isolated challenges such as that of the woman flouting the mandatory hijab in the yogurt incident should not, at least on paper, provoke the full weight of the state's repressive apparatus since, as scholars of authoritarianism have shown – autocrats do not respond to all threats equally (Davenport 2007; Carey 2010; Maerz 2020). From an autocrat's perspective, a woman's transgression of the public dress code and a passersby's reaction to it should further rank low on the list of priorities, especially for a state dealing with a spiraling economy marked by years of economic downturn, the deterioration of its regional status – most recently with the fall of a most loyal ally, Syria's Bashar Al-Assad – and recurrent domestic challenges, ever-so-often resulting in mass uprisings that visibilize the frustrations of large swaths of the population with the revolutionary regime. And yet, these symbolic acts do matter as the

regime has consistently shown, deploying a multi-pronged repressive strategy in the same way it would handle any other serious challenge to its rule.

Taking the disconnect between oppositional challenge and state response as a starting point, this dissertation asks – why have digitally shared images of subversive acts provoked such a response? Why have oppositional actors used them with more frequency, and what are the ensuing dynamics of resistance and repression that take shape around women’s pushback to discriminatory laws?

I address these questions through an analysis of what I term “visual protest movements” – a form of collective action which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Enabled by the rise of new technologies, actors across these movements combine the immediacy of smartphone cameras with social media’s ability to rapidly disseminate content to wider audiences to engage in momentary rebellions. As a result, fleeting resistant performances, practices, and speech-acts are captured and shared globally, asserting power and agency in closed contexts.

For example, since the mid-2010’s, Russian LGBTQ+ activists have circulated pictures of themselves kissing, hugging, or holding rainbow flags in front of state buildings as a demonstration of defiance to strict anti-gay legislation. Others have similarly engaged in such “one-person protests” by holding signs denouncing the state’s suppression of gay civil liberties, despite the potential for arrest (Reuters 2020). The global structure of social media has facilitated the broader exposure these isolated resistant acts receive while encouraging the formation of new solidarities around them. This was evident when allies of the Russian LGBTQ+ movement in Brazil supported their compatriots by sharing pictures of themselves engaged in similar acts, tagging their locations as “the Kremlin” to call attention to state violence while inserting themselves into tightly controlled political spaces (Jackman 2017).

In Saudi Arabia, similar dynamics unfolded in the early 2010's as women protested the country's female driving ban by sharing clips of themselves driving on YouTube. As Khalil and Storie recount from interviews with participants of the movement: "many participants did not know each other, and acted individually, filming themselves while driving and sharing the videos" (2020, 11). They go on to note that the movement was largely "uncoordinated," lacking an organizational structure which made it easy for women to participate in different capacities, "anonymous," by allowing participants to withhold their personal identities, and "flexible" in allowing for various campaigns, the inclusion of men, and the use of diverse strategies that amplified the cause in critical moments throughout the movement.

These examples share stark similarities with the Iranian case where an equally hostile state has compelled women to adopt creative strategies of protest in their opposition to public morality laws. Freedom House (2025) ranks Iran among the most "unfree" countries in the world, awarding it a mere 11/100 rating for freedom in 2024, based on various political factors. Except for all but one factor comprising its overall rating for "freedom of expression and belief," Iran received 0/4 points in 2024.

Scholars have discussed Iran's turn to even more repression in recent years (Milani 2015; Parsa 2020; Golkar 2022), marking a sharp departure from the quasi-republican framework established by the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to move the state closer towards an all-out clerical dictatorship under Ayatollah Khamenei and his cadre. Dissent and oppositional challenges are, as a result, increasingly less tolerated, making both institutionally confined challenges – i.e. elections, parties, and legal reform – and extra-institutional challenges – i.e. protests and mass mobilization – less feasible. Women have had to navigate this environment using tactics that avoid immediate

detection or reprisal, engaging in protest using new technologies, performances, and practices that tackle harmful issues while maintaining a degree of protection from the state's repressive reach.

Women, in particular, have been compelled to adopt such strategies, given the Islamic Republic's pronounced sensibility to questions of gender which are deeply entangled with its ideological foundations. Since the regime's inception in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, the regime's founder, embedded specific visions of gender at the core of the revolutionary project, rendering challenges to gender norms equal to challenges against the regime itself. In contrast to the Westernized, individualistic, and consumerist character of the previous regime – where Khomeini believed gender and sexuality had been exploited in the name of modernization – the post-revolutionary order emphasized religious piety and repositioned gender as central to a broader effort to restructure society along Islamic ideals.

Leaders framed their positions on gender and sexuality as essential to the collective flourishing of a religious communal order, drawing legitimacy from early Shi'a thought. Within this framework, the *faqih* (Islamic jurist) is tasked with interpreting and implementing God's will on earth, guiding societal progress through a moral juridical order (Dabashi 2017). Religious edicts are “no longer merely personal matters of faith,” but binding legal obligations enforceable by the state (Afary 2009, 267). Rights, responsibilities, and individual liberties were constructed through concerns for moral sanctity, weaving religious doctrine into the fabric of both private and public life, and positioning adherence to these norms as a communal duty.

This moral foundation has remained mostly in-tact (at least on its surface) – creating a problem for an increasingly young, modern population confronting an archaic, invasive state which prides itself on upholding women's roles as caregivers, “regulating their public (and in some cases) private bodily functions,” to ensure they do not deviate from their sexual and reproductive

roles (Afary 2009, 267). To enforce this vision, the state relies on three technologies of power to ensure women's compliance to the laws and the practices collectively comprising its "gender regime" (Walby 2023). The first and most visible is mandatory hijab, covering and hiding women's bodies by force to protect both them and men from potential sexual temptation. Women are legally required to cover their hair and wear either a long coat or the full-body chador in public to obscure the contours of their bodies and conform to state-defined standards of modesty.

Spatial segregation constitutes a second, interrelated technology, dividing spaces along gender lines while making access to them contingent on whether, and how well, women abide by hijab and other moral codes. Public and semi-public spaces such as schools, gyms, sports stadiums, beaches, movie theaters, and public transportation are often either entirely off-limits to women or contain designated "female-only" sections. Women's mobility and public comportment are further restricted to activities deemed compatible with the preservation of public morality. Everyday acts such as exercising, dancing, or singing are relegated to private spaces, where it is assumed they will occur solely in the presence of male relatives, thereby reinforcing gendered boundaries between public and private life.

Surveillance constitutes the third pillar, alongside segregation and the hijab, to police compliance. In the early years of the revolution, morality enforcement was carried out by young ideological zealots who patrolled public spaces, intervening in behaviors deemed immoral or subversive. Over time, these informal patrols evolved into formalized state forces, now institutionalized as "morality police" and stationed at the entrances of malls, universities, and other public venues, or moving through urban spaces to monitor and reprimand perceived transgressions. Where physical presence is limited, surveillance cameras extend the regime's gaze, encroaching on even those spaces not directly reachable by authorities. Together, these interlocking

technologies of power sustain the ideological framework that defines and restricts women's roles in the religious state order, coupling "disciplinary conduct" with brute force to deter dissent and preempt acts of defiance (Foucault 1975).

For their part, women have resisted such overtures on their bodily rights since the beginning of the revolution. Women's organizations, magazines, and blogs often appeared alongside attempts for institutional reform, challenging taboo topics and strict legislation (Hoodfar 1999; Mojab 2001; Amir-Ebrahimi 2008; Sadeghi 2010). Yet, the regime's gradual intolerance of dissent – becoming even more pronounced in the mid-2000's leading up to the Green Movement – and sensitivity to women's issues, has made organizing on a sizable scale difficult. Identity-based issues such as gender and sexuality, or the material technologies enforcing them, such as the hijab and gender segregation, further remained relatively untouched through the better part of the Islamic Republic's history – until a unique configuration of social media posts appeared in 2014, challenging such trends.

"My Stealthy Freedom" first appeared as a Facebook page, sharing images of women unveiled, dancing, singing, and laughing throughout public sites in Iran. Such innocent expressions of joy gradually turned into a full-fledged movement spanning several platforms. Coordinated campaigns against the compulsory hijab, discussions of public experiences with harassment, and showing fleeting moments of defiance against bans on public singing or dancing collectively comprised the movement, representing the decentralized, hybrid (digital-physical), and performative ways women asserted a challenge to the Islamic Republic's gender regime in the twenty-first century.

By 2018, such sneaky insubordinate acts became more daring with public challenges to the compulsory hijab staged throughout various sites, drawing attention to women's issues while

building new coalitions around them. Once a thirty-one-year-old mother, Vida Movahed, stepped atop a utility box on Tehran’s Revolution Street to wave her headscarf on a stick in a silent act of protest, other women repeated her act across dozens of cities and towns in Iran in what became known as the “Girls of Revolution Street.” These protests drew from “My Stealthy Freedom” in visually subverting key elements of the state’s ideological and material apparatus of control, showing women circumventing the surveillance and segregation undergirding compliance to public morality laws.

As these challenges grew more pronounced, so did a new culture of resistance which emerged full force with the launch of “Woman, Life, Freedom,” in 2022. Women in that movement turned incremental challenges to public morality laws into everyday practices of expression and autonomy. Images merely documented these practices as they proliferated across the public sphere, making them a medium, as much as precursor, to large-scale protests.

Together, these waves of protest disrupted key pillars of the regime’s ideological and repressive apparatus upholding its gender regime, gradually replacing it with a new gender order grounded in equality, joy, and free expression. Digitally subversive acts drew on the global sharing capacities of social media to re-insert women back into the public spheres they had long been relegated from, while simultaneously generating new identities, relationships, and coalitions around them. Women used images to recreate the body-space nexus core to the power of authoritarian gender regimes, while reimagining the public sphere as a site of inclusion and possibility. Over time, they flipped the narrative on women’s acts as immoral to instead reframe them as ordinary and rightful – a process with material consequences for the physical world as evidenced by “Woman, Life, Freedom.”

I argue that the political stakes of these media practices stem from the affordances they create for protest. In her book *Listening to Images*, Lisa Camp (2017) explores the physical and affective registers of Black portraiture by being attuned to what she calls the “lower frequencies” of analysis. These less obvious dimensions are what allow images to tell their stories, especially across vast archives where meaning is woven both into and in between visual artefacts. Across the archive of Iranian women’s protest pictures, these lower frequencies – or affordances – attack the ideational and material pillars of authoritarian control. If, since the 1979 Revolution, the state has manipulated aspects of space, women’s bodies, religious doctrine, and its elevated status as hegemon to ensure compliance to its gender regime, images systematically undo the elements upholding that construction, provoking multi-pronged challenges to state architectures of power and control.

How they do that lies in specific features of protest and organization that digital media make easier, embedding them into state-society dynamics in both the physical and digital realms. Digital images enable certain advantages for dissent by circumventing, or directly subverting, authoritarian mechanisms designed to suppress mobilization. In the context of Iran’s authoritarian environment, visibility is one such advantage, allowing women to gradually shift private to public acts in demonstrating resistance to state-imposed morality laws. This visibility challenges the isolation, fear, and threat of violence women face in ensuring their compliance to the gender order, bringing eyes to what would otherwise be acts hidden from view. Rather than remaining the targets of surveillance, women additionally apply this visibility to state mechanisms of control – turning the camera outward in rendering the state’s violence publicly accountable.

The visibility that social media affords women stems from their hybrid qualities – anchored in physical, public acts which are captured, shared, and viewed digitally. By manipulating aspects

of both digital and physical spaces, women can choose which aspects of themselves appear in public view, offering them a degree of protection in an otherwise high-risk environment. Whereas the body in physical space is always subject to repression – regardless of how well obscured – the digital-physical body may be viewed without doubly being identified. Women can thus obscure aspects of themselves subject to identification and backlash, making hybrid space a second advantage of digital visual protest.

Within this hybrid space, some degree of coordination remains necessary to turn isolated resistant acts into collective action. This is where the “social” dimension of social media becomes crucial as feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares – alongside the emotional resonance of the images themselves (whether evoking shock, fear, anger, or joy) – motivate repeat actions. These feedback mechanisms foster a process of experiential learning, through which collective identities, shared discourses, and collective action frames begin to take shape from the ground-up. By spreading information in a non-coordinated and non-hierarchical way, requiring no co-presence in time and place, diffusion thus emerges as a third affordance of visual media, with important aggregate effects for shaping cultures of defiance that normalize dissent over time.

These three advantages converge with the creativity of actors – who perform, imagine, and enact alternative identities, relationships, discourses, and forms of public presence that challenge and ultimately seek to replace those of the old system. By lessening the conceptual space between the means and aims of protest, images allow actors to embody the future they envision – engaging in practices of alternative world-making as a fourth capacity of visual protest. These acts materialize new ways of being and establish a revised sense of what is normal, desirable, and possible. They draw on the image’s hybrid quality to reclaim authority over public life, asserting

new relational forms that begin to reconfigure – and eventually supplant – the gendered exclusions typical of public spaces.

Each of these affordances tackles one element of the Islamic Republic’s gender regime which upholds certain spatial, bodily, and relational ideals to subjugate women. Taken together, these affordances offer an alternative understanding of the power and potential of images in protest, implicating them in the processes of mobilization and dissent towards strengthening oppositional capacities, altering societal dynamics, and paving the path for future outcomes.

Core Claims

I explore these processes through an analysis of three waves of Iranian women’s protests – “My Stealthy Freedom,” “Girls, of Revolution Street,” and “Woman, Life, Freedom” – where digital image-sharing has played a key role in activism. The core arguments of this work unfold across three central claims. First, digital image-sharing emerged against other historical factors to become a medium of protest. As I show, it was far from obvious from the outset – either to women or the state – that digital platforms would shape gender-based challenges in this way. This is partly why, for example, Instagram, a highly visual medium, remained one of the only openly accessible social media platforms after the state’s suppression of dissent in the 2009 Green Movement, and why state actors responded haphazardly, and at times contradictorily, in attempts to stem its impacts. Drawing on the “Dynamics of Contention” framework in social movement studies – which understands contentious episodes as contingent, sequential, and shaped through relational interactions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 2012; Tarrow and Tilly 2015) – I trace how these dynamics unfolded in the Islamic Republic, culminating in the emergence of “My Stealthy Freedom” in 2014.

The second claim focuses on the four affordances of image-based protest outlined above, illustrating how women strategically employ certain aspects of digital media to challenge the foundational pillars of the Islamic Republic's ideological and material control. By grounding gender-based resistance in the documentation and dissemination of subversive acts, women circumvented many of the traditional barriers to mobilization – substituting core elements of the social media process with more fluid, decentralized alternatives. The conventional reliance on social movement organizations (SMOs), access to resources, collective identity formation, and framing were all replaced by a non-hierarchical and distributed model of information-sharing, learning, and strategic adaptation, scaling up towards the development of a “mass movement.” In doing so, women's use of images disrupted the blueprint of authoritarian control – challenging both the discourses and enforcement mechanisms sustaining it – and proved a uniquely effective and flexible form of dissent capable of confronting authoritarian power.

Lastly, I argue that women's digital dissent reveals as much about the Iranian state as it does about the evolution of protest movements. My analysis shows that women's strategies of resistance and the regime's strategies of repression have developed in tandem, reflecting an ongoing process of mutual learning and adaptation on the part of both movement and state actors. Part of the enduring impact of digital images lies in their capacities to absorb, circumvent, and confront repression rather than collapsing under it. Yet the state has also adapted, deploying new political, social, and economic tools to counter these challenges. This dual evolution highlights both the state's anxieties – seeking to override challenges to its power with its own innovative approaches – and the power of digital images in provoking such outcomes. By tracing this dynamic over time, my analysis reveals the reciprocal nature of contention, in which women continuously develop creative forms of protest to advance gender equality, and the state responds with

increasingly sophisticated efforts to suppress them. Together, these interactions expose the enduring and contested struggles over gender, visibility, power, and agency in contemporary Iran.

Dissertation Outline

Chapter One begins with a theoretical overview of the themes of authoritarianism, social movements, and social media core to this dissertation. I begin with a discussion on how authoritarian regimes consolidate and sustain power – emphasizing the dual reliance on “hard” and “soft” strategies of repression – in showing both how these mechanisms work to entrench authoritarian power and shape the context within which oppositional challenges must emerge. In the face of exclusion from institutional participation and the pervasive isolation, fear, and violence characteristic of authoritarian settings, I then show how actors either channel their frustrations into sporadic episodes of collective action or through everyday acts of resistances using tactics of passive noncompliance. Social media has played a key role in facilitating such challenges, as have the use of digital images as one element of the media landscape. I briefly preview how the affordances of such media have enabled protest in other contexts before turning to their specific significance for Iranian women, which I explore in greater depth in the sections that follow.

Chapter Two situates the theoretical framework within the broader historical context of power and resistance under the Islamic Republic. I trace how gender has been central to the regime’s political and ideological project from its inception, with control over women’s bodies, spatial movements, and social relations positioned as essential to maintaining a morally just society. Women have had to navigate both the discursive and material dimensions of this gender order – reinforced through a complex apparatus of legal restrictions, surveillance, and the threat of violence – to assert their rights and challenge state-imposed boundaries. From the early 1980s

through the mid-2000s, many of these challenges took the form of rights-based activism aimed at reconciling Islamic law with gender equality (Osanloo 2009; Sameh 2019). However, a conservative shift in state ideology and policy – particularly after the suppression of the 2009 Green Movement and the subsequent exile of thousands of dissidents, including prominent women’s activists – pushed many gender-based struggles into more fragmented and less visible forms.

At the same time, globalization and the introduction of new technologies, such as camera phones and social media, began to reshape the terrain of dissent. These tools enabled new modes of communication and self-expression that were more adaptable to the shifting political environment. In times of heightened repression, they served as alternative spaces of exchange beyond state-controlled media, helping to preserve and expand budding cultures of resistance. By the early 2010s, this led to the emergence of new visual repertoires of protest that the regime increasingly viewed as threatening. It was within this evolving landscape that “My Stealthy Freedom” emerged in 2014, marking a turning point in how women challenged Iran’s gender regime.

The next three chapters examine the role of digital images across each of the movements at the heart of this dissertation. Chapter Three focuses on the emergence of “My Stealthy Freedom” and the evolution of women’s media practices from mostly the sharing of isolated experiences to increasingly public acts of defiance. Over time, these image-based practices expanded to include strategic coordination, symbolic resistance, and new forms of collective action against public morality laws – gradually eroding the entrenched divide between private and public life that has long been used to subjugate women under the Islamic Republic.

Chapter Four traces a significant shift in the production of visually subversive acts with the emergence of “Girls of Revolution Street” – a mostly physical movement based on women’s public displays of protest to the compulsory hijab. While the documentation and digital circulation of these acts continued earlier practices provoking shifts in the private-public divide, they also introduced a critical new dynamic: the visualization of kinship. Kinship, understood here as a form of coalition-building, became central to the movement process by signaling solidarity with women’s defiance while reshaping the fear-based logic that often deters collective participation under authoritarian rule. These acts thus not only demonstrated support for women but made visible a growing frustration with the gender order, reframing defiance as collective and widespread. By publicly demonstrating shared resistance, this wave of protest expanded the social base of opposition and brought women’s struggles further into public consciousness – laying essential groundwork for the broader mobilization seen in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Five shows how women sustained many of the same visual strategies alongside mass protest in “Woman, Life, Freedom,” drawing from earlier waves while following a more traditional movement trajectory. Jina Amini’s death in state custody marked an opening in the regime structure that allowed long-simmering frustrations to erupt into collective action. As the regime responded with sweeping repression, the intensity of public anger accelerated the speed of protest and the production and dissemination of images, collapsing the distance between action and documentation.

In contrast to earlier movements where images played a central role in staging defiant acts, this wave saw image-sharing follow from a mass movement that had already occupied the public sphere. Visuals became less a catalyst for change than a mirror of it – capturing how the discourses,

identities, and practices cultivated in prior waves had become embedded in everyday protest culture. Rather than working to normalize resistant acts, these images reflected their normalization, evidencing how previously radical gestures had become part of a new collective common sense. In doing so, “Woman, Life, Freedom” signaled a maturation of women’s demands, where images no longer just documented dissent but showed a new social order proliferating and asserting power over the public sphere.

Applied Methods

My approach to understanding digital visual protest and its entanglement within broader dynamics of resistance and repression draws from two complementary analytical perspectives. The first involves historical process-tracing to map the evolution of Iran’s social and political landscape across two key periods: 1979–2009 and 2009–2014. In the first period, I examine how the regime’s evolving views on gender, sexuality, and male-female relations were institutionalized through bodily, spatial, and relational transformations, reshaping the structure of everyday life. This sets the stage for the second part of the analysis, which traces the development of women’s resistance strategies in response to these shifts across five phases, before culminating in 2009 with the violent suppression of the Green Movement, which transformed both the nature of state repression and the politics of dissent.

In the post-2009 period, I trace how diminishing political tolerance, the widespread adoption of new communication technologies, and a sharply narrowing opportunity structure that rendered dissent increasingly costly, converged in a distinct media practice in 2014. These conditions fostered the emergence of a new visual culture centered on platforms like Instagram, even as the regime grew more anxious and alert to the threat these digital spaces posed in their

formative stages. To examine both historical periods, I drew on mostly secondary scholarly sources to document key developments at the intersection of gender, resistance, and authoritarian control. These materials provide the foundational context for the second part of my analysis, which explores the meaning and significance of women’s visual protest over the past decade.

For this second part, I applied large-scale image analysis and discourse analysis to the visual content and captions corresponding to the three waves of Iranian women’s protests. To examine the evolving relationship between visual protest and state repression, I also employed matrix analysis to capture relational patterns and outcomes across these developments. Using the Python package Instaloader, I downloaded all posts from the Instagram account of Masih Alinejad – the founder of “My Stealthy Freedom” – dating back from February 2022. During the data-cleaning process, I filtered out posts unrelated to the movement, such as those tied to Alinejad’s broader journalistic work, and separated images from captions for closer analysis. To verify the completeness of the dataset, I cross-referenced these posts with content from the “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page. This comparison revealed a noteworthy discrepancy: despite the movement’s far greater visibility on Instagram – where Alinejad has 8.8 million followers and nearly 22,000 posts as of this writing – many posts on the Facebook page never appeared on Instagram, leading me to center my analysis on the Facebook page, supplementing it with Instagram posts where appropriate.

Due to Facebook’s restricted API access, I downloaded the 4,213 posts corresponding to the movement by hand, employing a research assistant from October 2023 to February 2024 to facilitate this process. Together, we cleaned and organized the data by year, categorizing posts into separate folders and uploading them—alongside relevant Instagram content—into Atlas.ti for qualitative analysis. I used this same archive to examine the “Girls of Revolution Street”

movement, as many of its posts were shared on the same page (235 in total), making it more accessible than attempting to retrieve content from other platforms with their own data access restrictions. Nonetheless, I supplemented the dataset by consulting posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram to expand the analytical lens, particularly in capturing broader discourses surrounding the movement.

For “Woman, Life, Freedom,” I returned to Instagram given the movement’s wider popularity across that platform, concentrating my analysis to one page – 1500Tasvir – which frequently posted images and videos submitted directly from protestors on the ground. Using the Instaloader Python package, I downloaded 3,203 pictures and videos from this page, covering the period from Jina Amini’s reported arrest on September 14, 2022 to December 31, 2022 – an arbitrary cutoff I assigned to the movement.

On Atlas.ti, I coded data from all three protest waves through the lens of critical visual theory. Critical visual theory purports that an image’s overarching meaning is the sum of its individual component parts (Rose 2016). Four modalities of analysis – the image’s site of production, audience, circulation, and composition – make up the framework, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the broader meaning and impact of images as they are created and disseminated across social media. Applying this framework to my data, I developed a coding schema centered on recurring visual and contextual elements within protest images. These included women’s bodily poses, clothing, gestures, emotional expressions, and spoken phrases (for video content), as well as the physical settings in which the images were situated. Additional components, such as the use of signs or symbols, were also coded.

For “My Stealthy Freedom,” I ended up with 212 codes organized into seven overarching categories: activity, campaigns, clothing, figures, issues, location, and techniques. I applied a

similar categorical framework to the analysis of both “Girls of Revolution Street” and “Woman, Life, Freedom,” while remaining attentive to the differing salience of particular categories across movements. For a systematic review of the accompanying captions for “My Stealthy Freedom,” I exported them into a separate Excel file, where I conducted multiple rounds of close reading to identify recurring patterns indicative of discursive shifts in how actors articulated protest and dissent. Since the 1500Tasvir page shared mostly only short, informational captions tied to the location, date, and time of the content, I mostly kept my analysis of “Woman, Life, Freedom” limited to the images, though I consulted captions when additional context was necessary. In both cases, I relied on Farsi captions to maintain the essence of the work, even where English-language content was available such as, for example, across the “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page. For “Girls of Revolution Street,” most posts were tangentially shared or reposted by Masih Alinejad, and the associated captions were not authored by the original participants. Given this degree of separation, I opted to exclude the captions from formal analysis, drawing on them only when needed for contextual clarification to avoid misrepresenting the movement’s core messaging and authorship.

To analyze the interactive dynamics between women’s movements and the Iranian state, I conducted a separate investigation of news reports, speeches, and media commentary drawn from three primary sources: IranWire, BBC Persian, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. I also examined speech events and official statements published on Ali Khamenei’s state-run media page. Using this material, I conducted a matrix analysis to compare key moments in women’s dissent with corresponding shifts in state response. I drew on the framework of “time-ordered matrices” introduced by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) – a qualitative analytical technique often implemented in spreadsheet applications like Excel. In this approach, one dimension of inquiry –

such as protest events – is arranged across rows, while another – such as state reactions – is placed across columns. By examining the intersections between these axes, I was able to identify patterns and turning points, such as shifts in state strategy, the adoption of new protest tactics, or notable changes in the regime’s rhetoric. These overlaps highlighted moments of structural transformation within the broader dynamics of contention undergirding women’s visual protests.

In summarizing these analytical approaches, I process-traced two historical periods before the launch of “My Stealthy Freedom.” The period from 1979 to 2009 captures the consolidation of the Islamic Republic’s gender regime and the strategies women adopted to challenge its discriminatory structures. The second period, from 2009 to 2014, traces the socio-political transformations that created the conditions for women to engage in new forms of digital visual expression. To assess the significance of these visual practices for both women and the state, I conducted a large-scale image analysis of three periods of women’s mobilization, supplementing this with contextual insights and discursive interpretations drawn from accompanying captions. Finally, I triangulated this analysis with a separate archive of media coverage to identify strategic shifts on both sides, demonstrating the dynamic interplay shaping resistance and repression over time.

Applying Insights from Iran to the Broader Landscape of Protest in the Twenty-First Century

The following chapters apply these methods to Iranian women’s visual protests, illustrating how subversive image-sharing emerges within an all-encompassing authoritarian structure – and, in turn, disrupts core elements of that structure to advance women’s equality, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression. Outside of its obvious implications for the field of Iranian and Middle Eastern studies, this study adds valuable insights to those across a number of other topical areas as

well. Those researching social media, visuals, gender, and authoritarian regimes would find this study relevant as it applies new theorizations on digital media and collective action, grounding core debates within these fields in a broader landscape of empirical cases.

First, the Iranian case highlights the creative strategies actors employ in the space between everyday resistance and mass mobilization. While social media scholars have shed light on how platforms facilitate collective action online (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) and choreograph mass participation offline (Gerbaudo 2012), much of this literature – like the broader social movements scholarship – tends to treat resistance in binary terms: either as large-scale mobilization or as individualized, expressive acts. The Iranian case, however, reveals a dynamic middle ground in which isolated challenges can scale up towards the formation of mass movements through creative strategies blending digital and physical forms of engagement. Drawing on the work of Asef Bayat, James Scott, and Michel de Certeau, I show how digital media becomes embedded into everyday acts of resistance and the implications such actions have on broader power structures.

Taking digital image-sharing as one example of such practices, the Iranian case shows the power of such media for tactical innovation, diversion, learning, and discourse and norm creation – each with a set of material consequences for the physical world. Beyond their expressive function, images carry profound political stakes. Visuals participate in the shaping of alternative realities just as much as communicate aspects of it – connecting these isolated expressive mediums with the broader sociopolitical structures that mutually shape and reinforce them. The Iranian women’s media practices at the heart of this dissertation offer compelling examples of these alternative visual functions, particularly in the context of authoritarian regimes where the polis restricts women’s engagement.

Gender-based challenges, such as those seen in Iran, have particularly benefited from such visual practices – reconfiguring the gendered body and the disciplinary mechanisms that shape and constrain it. (Dis)embodied acts of resistance and gender performances enhanced by the organizational and communicative capacities of digital media have formed a key aspect of fourth wave feminism in recent years. Since gender is constructed through specific visual regimes that assign meaning to bodies and spatial practices, it follows that visual media can also serve as a powerful tool for deconstructing those same regimes. Visual regimes mediate the boundary between public and private, determining what is rendered visible and what remains unseen. The cases across this dissertation exemplify the ways women’s use of visuals renegotiate those boundaries – embedding visuals into gendered power dynamics.

Lastly, the challenges Iranian women have posed to the regime highlight how power is continuously renegotiated through digital tools. These new media practices expose the vulnerabilities of authoritarian systems that rely on the illusion of total control. They reveal how alternative forms of expression – emerging outside the state-controlled public sphere – can catalyze broader shifts within the political order, forcing leaders to contend with the dual threat that these technologies pose: not just in enabling dissent, but in altering the very terrain on which dissent and control are exercised. Those interested in questions of power and agency can get a glimpse at that dance – as it plays out in Iran – in this dissertation. In seeing how digital tools create new forms of agency that interacts with power structure, they can see how, together with new modes of visibility, these technologies reconfigure the plain on which each side exercises power, and renegotiate it, over time.

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CHAPTER 2: BREAKING DOWN THE GENDER ORDER

Introduction

On April 19, 2023, the “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page shared a three-by-three collage featuring nine photographs – some selfies, others posed or seemingly spontaneous – of women across Iran in the aftermath of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. Despite their casual, everyday aesthetic, the images shared two defining features: women appeared unveiled in all of them, and none showed their faces, using poses to strategically hide features that could be used to identify them. In other contexts, these photos might form part of a personal collection, shared online as expressions of identity or style. The range of contemporary haircuts, hair colors, and fashion choices would typically blend into the digital landscape of everyday life. In Iran, however, such images provoke what Jasper (2008) calls a “moral shock” – a provocation of feelings of boldness and bravery for showing women’s outright rejection of mandatory hijab laws and gender mandates.

Using such photos, Iranian women provoked a broad-based attack of the regime’s religio-moral gender order where laws, norms, and discourses render such acts illegal. By using digitally shared photos and videos as a medium of protest, women visibilized the contours of gender oppression while asserting a right to public space, all while protecting themselves from direct retaliation by the state. They performed an alternative gender order through which these acts were normalized, routine, and demonstrated shared presence – akin to mass mobilization – even amid the state’s aggressive tactics to shut down these acts. Women, in essence, innovated a new form of mobilization – one that bypassed traditional barriers to street protests – while targeting the regime’s mechanisms of control, destabilizing the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic as a modern authoritarian state.

This chapter places subversive image-sharing at the center of women’s mobilization efforts against the state, showing how images tackled the material and ideational basis for authoritarian control. As I will show, this “repertoire of contention” evolved relationally against both past mobilization efforts and state attempts to suppress dissent, making it a contingent, temporal, and sequential phenomenon (Tarrow and Tilly 2015). By learning from past efforts to tackle the state’s gender discriminatory code while combining these efforts with a decentralized medium of communication allowing for tactical shifts in how women continued protests, movements such as “My Stealthy Freedom,” “Girls of Revolution Street,” and “Woman, Life, Freedom” sustained over ten years of gender-based activism under the Islamic Republic. Physical acts, digital visibility, and online sharing combined in a unique strategy of protest turning the tools of state surveillance against themselves, while tackling the discourses and norms on gender morality and public presence. Women visualized, and gradually normalized, an alternative gender order rooted in joy, autonomy, and equality – disrupting the spatial bounds, ideological foundations, and repressive apparatus upholding compliance to Iran’s authoritarian gender regime.

Such dynamics of power and dissent offer a new lens for understanding activism at the intersections of social media, gender, and visibility. As I suggest in this chapter, digital image-sharing was not solely a modicum of expression, but central to how women contested the state’s grip on power. Social media enabled new modes of communication, public presence, and self-expression that, in turn, sparked novel forms of dissent. Women combined fleeting performances of defiance staged in public spaces with the camera’s capacities to document, and social media’s affordances to share subversive acts, gradually pushing to the public sphere acts traditionally confined to private spaces. In the process, they brought visibility to what were previously isolated experiences with state forces and their own individualized expressions of resistance, subverting

the mechanisms of repression. In other words, digital visual protests forced the state into a reactive posture in struggling to adapt to a rapidly shifting terrain of public opposition – offering new opportunities to theorize authoritarian sensibilities in addition to new forms of defiance leveraging digital technologies.

In examining the relationality of movement to state, this chapter begins with a review of the literature on authoritarian power in showing the various facets of that power that women exploit with visual sharing. I then turn to a discussion on the forms of resistance that typically emerge in such contexts, before suggesting that digital visual protest – as situated between the digital and physical public spheres – challenges conventional understandings of resistance with new modes of organization, presence, and protest. In the final section, I explore what these technologies make possible for protest in Iran by focusing on four key affordances – visibility, hybrid presence, diffusion, and alternative world-making – that women have leveraged in their struggles against state patriarchy.

Part I: The Dynamics of Resistance and Repression in Authoritarian Contexts

The Anatomy of Authoritarian Rule

In 1986, Steven Lukes suggested that formal politics structures the exercise of power in obscure ways. Sanctioned political power – i.e. the kind that takes shape across state institutions – is multi-dimensional and usually does not involve just repression and coercion if not a complex, less visible dimension aimed at shifting people’s perspectives and ideas (Lukes 1986). Political actors thus assert their will through explicit and implicit means, coupling brute force with ideology to more holistically drive their demands.

While this theory applies mostly to democratic contexts where rules and norms give power to certain individuals on the basis of merit, similar attributes undergird the exercise of power in authoritarian regimes where leaders must weigh the benefits of immediate physical force against the slower moving process of shaping ideas. When faced with opposition, authoritarian leaders often navigate the challenge of suppressing dissent without mobilizing the public or giving too much of their power away (Francisco 2005; Svobik 2012). This creates a dilemma in which leaders learn to balance multiple tactics. On the side of direct violence, they may develop extensive surveillance and repressive apparatuses to monitor, identify, and preemptively eliminate dissenters before their ideas gain traction (Boykoff 2007). These strategies are often complemented by "carrot and stick" methods, coopting and/or isolating potential challengers in stoking rifts within the opposition (Rasler 1996; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006), and exploiting institutional advantages to restrict access to resources and political participation (Davenport 2007).

“Soft” repression strategies – i.e. the less visible tentacles of state power – may involve the use of surveillance and informational communication technologies (ICTs) to preemptively monitor and suppress dissent (Chen and Moss 2018). Johnston and Zhang (2020), for example, demonstrate how Chinese authorities capitalize on the perceived neutrality of social media platforms, monitoring them to more easily identify dissenters rather than drive them underground. Meanwhile, other tactics may involve the channeling of dissent into state-sanctioned institutions, constraining its form and reach (Earl 2003; Gandhi 2008). Rather than waiting to handle public opposition once it has surfaced, these strategies anticipate mass mobilization and dissent, quashing would-be challengers before their ideas gain momentum (della Porta 1996; 2014).

In contrast to what Javier Auyero (2012) terms the “visible fists” of state repression, other subtle mechanisms include the shaping of information flows, the promotion of counter-discourses,

and the reinforcement of dominant norms in legitimizing rule and cultivating natural support for authoritarian rule (Easton 1975; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Koesel, Bunce, and Jessica 2020; Nathan 2020; Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024). Since the overt use of brute force is both costly and potentially destabilizing (Francisco 2005), leaders frequently adopt covert strategies aimed at molding public opinion. Media censorship serves as one such tool, limiting political awareness by obscuring regime failures, contradictions, and abuses (Geddes and Zaller 1989). Delivering material benefits, promising stability or economic growth, and invoking traditional values such as religious piety, familial duty, and national pride represent other commonly used tactics, aligning the authority of a leader with the population's protection and prosperity in prolonging rulership (von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Nathan 2020).

Such “symbolic power... help(s) allay the need for authoritarian Leviathans to apply repression at all, allowing political authorities to secure acquiescence and even a sense of appropriateness among their subjects” (Slater 2010, 17). By relying on preexisting ideological narratives such as anti-elitism, religious fundamentalism, or animosity towards sexual, racial, or ethnic minorities, authoritarians legitimize their rule by tying themselves to some vision for the future (Maynard 2022). This vision creates affective appeal by fostering a sense of hope and identification with leaders who, despite failing to deliver on their promises, inspire continued loyalty among their subjects (Wedeen 2019). Ideology thus becomes the glue keeping the regime structure intact. Using ideological cues, regime leaders are better able to mobilize support, maintain elite cohesion, and set boundaries for acceptable norms and discourses, regardless of whether the public genuinely buys into them or not (Wedeen 1999; Maynard 2022).

One manifestation of such ideological power can be found in the regime's regulation of gender and sexuality to serve its own needs. Feminist scholars have long shown how the state is a

“male” state with an inherent interest in protecting heteronormative gender and sexual relations (Connell 1990). How this relationship unfolds formulates a state’s “gender regime,” wherein the construction and regulation of gender and sexuality become central to broader political and ideological projects (McDowell 2013; Walby 2020). In authoritarian contexts, gender regimes often intersect with nationalist, religious, and state-building agendas, casting normative gender roles as essential to national cohesion and moral order (Ashwin 2012). Where these ideological projects fall short, surveillance and fear, rather than disciplinary conduct, maintain compliance to the regime’s gender order (Koch 2022; Walby 2023). Fear becomes embedded into an economy of laws, regulations, and practices of surveillance that govern women’s movements and spatial relationships (Gqola 2021), deterring acts of spatial and bodily subversion through the ever-present threat of harm to gendered bodies (Walby 2023). Ideology thus becomes inserted into both the narrative and execution of gender relations, underlying the construction of identities, subjectivities, spaces, and the relationships that take shape around them.

Navigating Authoritarianism: Resistance Under Authoritarian Power Structures

By perceiving opposing views as inherent threats, authoritarian leaders often force dissent in two primary directions. The first involves collective opposition and mass mobilization, emerging from the regime's systematic suppression of political expression and limited avenues for voicing grievances. In such cases, aggrieved actors navigating highly surveilled public spaces and tightly controlled environments merge with others who share similar frustrations. This convergence may imbue protest with an element of “surprise” as collective action surfaces despite seemingly insurmountable barriers to mobilization (Kuran 1991). Thus, as opposed to the linear and structured processes undergirding the formation of movements in Western contexts – i.e. where grievances merge with social movement organizations (SMOs) which, in turn, mobilize resources

towards a demand – unanticipated, messy, and unstructured revolts more accurately capture the “modes of contention” emerging across authoritarian regimes (Diani and Moffatt 2016).

In addition to the need for organizing quickly, the opposition in these contexts also frequently manipulates “openings” within the regime structure to mobilize for their demands. For example, under Suharto’s dictatorial rule in Indonesia, activists took advantage of the highly centralized nature of the regime to build coalitions on the periphery of power where the state has limited reach (Aspinall 2005). These coalitions then erupted in mass protests following the Asian Financial Crisis which created a political opening for a more coordinated effort, ultimately culminating in the regime’s downfall (2005). This example shares similarities with the Civil Rights Movement where mobilizing structures, political openings, and the framing of the movement’s goals and identity combined in the formulaic “political process model” of mobilization (McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1987). In both, fragmented actors built coalitions that sustained their grievances in a hostile environment, taking advantage of moments facilitating an escalation in their efforts.

In these contexts, fear, surveillance, and a limited civil society often make organizing out in the open a difficult feat. For example, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood similarly found openings outside of the centers of power to press for its demands, drawing on religious ideas that flew under the radar of authoritarian power to resonate culturally with the population (Wickham 2002). Similar to Islamists in Iran’s Shah era who similarly leveraged mosques as sites for organizing and political discussions, these efforts lay the foundation for such groups to emerge as a dominant faction to take power once the terrain has shifted to their advantage (Bayat 1998). Framing grievances in ways that connect with already available discourses, leveraging political openings, and connecting with diverse groups of actors – both inside and outside the bounds of

power¹ – thus shape movements in authoritarian contexts, overlapping with the mobilization process in democratic contexts albeit differences due to highly controlled environments.

Opposed to overt forms of pushback, the second form of dissent extends from tactical manipulation of regime elements as well; however, such opposition is not always channeled into an organized, collective movement. Broadly defined as “everyday forms of resistance,” passive forms of defiance such as jokes, sabotage, foot-dragging, and noncompliance can become proverbial spaces to vent out frustrations and express disagreement with the ruling order, asserting power and agency in closed contexts (Scott 1985; 1990). In some cases, these acts engage with state institutions and the ruling order, making resistance more political by nature. For example, in China, aggrieved populations have learned which themes are acceptable to mobilize around, targeting local leaders and their ineptitudes which creates a buffer between them and the core of state power as an untouchable subject (O’Brien and Li 2006). Similarly, civil society organizations have learned how to pass on information to their members without triggering repression, maneuvering political contexts by exploiting topics deemed non-threatening to regime leaders (Fu 2017). Similar to women in Chile who leveraged aspects of Pinochet’s discourses on motherhood to press for information on their missing loved ones (Noonan 1995), such actors engage with aspects of the regime to deliver material benefits, showing the decentralized manner in which learning and organizing occur despite the absence of large-scale organizations.

Emerging from the very systems they encounter, such creative engagement with regime structures adapts to the lack of opportunities for participation and expression (de Certeau 1984).

¹ Madriaga Quinsaat (2019) shows the pivotal role the diaspora plays in creating the linkages between local and global discourses. By constantly rooting economic and political grievances to Marcos’s incapacity to govern in the Philippines, for example, the diaspora moved the opposition to target the regime in shaping protests from the outside.

Evolving instead towards “patterns of resistance” that can challenge the hegemonic authority of leaders and force change over time, these acts do important cultural work (Gramsci 1971), reminding others that not everyone agrees with the ruling order and that resistance persists. In the Middle East, for example, “hit-and-run protests,” in the form of graffiti on abandoned buildings or contentious chants at soccer games, momentarily take over institutionalized spaces to express defiance (Johnston 2005). These acts can gradually scale up in forcing tacit acceptance on the part of authorities despite no changes to the legal structure.

For example, in Iran, street dwellers have manipulated the state’s slow response to their non-traditional housing structures, “institutionalizing” their communities through gradual expansion, street names, and bottom-up construction, making it harder for the state to get rid of them (Bayat 2013). Women have similarly forced adaptations to what is considered “rightful” public presentation, using new colors and styles that reveal more hair, pushing the envelope on compulsory hijab laws despite no apparent changes to the law (2013). In the same way that the state leverages its privileged position to shape norms and actions, and surveil them in ensuring compliance, individuals have learned how to manipulate aspects of those same structures. At times, such practices can erupt in mass movements and, in others, enshrine a current of resistance that can reform the regime from the inside, or build momentum towards future opportunities for mobilization, once they emerge.

Activism in the Digital Era

In the early 2010s, a series of mass protests broke out across the Middle East collectively labeled the “Arab Spring.” In the same era as the Iranian Green Movement, Occupy Wall Street, Los Indignados, and Turkey’s Gezi Park protests, the Arab Spring became yet another example of spontaneously organized mass movements appearing without any centralized leadership, driven

instead by grassroots mobilization, shared grievances, and the use of digital tools like social media to coordinate action and deliver change. Social media appeared as a new mobilizing force, changing the terrain on which activism operated with new forms of communication, expression, engagement, and co-presence.

Facebook groups became spaces to build coalitions and collective identities, supplanting the slow-moving process of building collective resistance under previous models (Abul-Fottouh and Fetner 2018). Other platform features facilitated linkages between disparate civil society organizations, activists, and the diaspora, overcoming the isolation inherent to the public sphere in authoritarian societies. Unlike the subtle acts of resistance common to exercising agency in such places, “small scale, hidden or backstage mobilizations [relying] heavily on creativity and symbolism” were “trigger(ing)... larger (and eventually more recognizable) collective actions once political opportunities opened,” creating new pathways of defiance in closed contexts (Johnston and Zhang 2020, 615–16).

In Tunisia and Egypt, those adept at online communications forged and expanded political openings in the regime by building momentum around events happening in the public sphere – events which regime leaders usually tried to suppress with their monopoly on media. For example, the self-immolation of a young street vendor fed up with poor treatment from authorities in Tunisia sparked outrage once pictures and videos showing backlash to peaceful protesters gathering in his name appeared online. Bringing visibility to state repression only further galvanized the population, taking to the streets in calling for the ousting of long-time dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Howard and Hussain 2011). Similarly in Egypt, the beating and death of a young Khaled Said by Egyptian police further sewed rifts in the population once images of Said’s desecrated body spread online, symbolizing the everyday experiences with Egyptian authorities many people

underwent. Like the Tunisian example, images accounted for nearly fifty percent of online interactions, becoming a key part of how actors overcame the suppression of information and the isolation of dissent common to such places (Brym et al. 2014).

Once movements appeared on the ground, these same technologies took shape around other uses, helping activists deflect state violence in quelling further demonstrations. Activists often intentionally shared misinformation on social media on where protests would be, deceiving authorities known to be observing online interactions (Allagui and Kuebler 2011). During demonstrations, updating others on the whereabouts of police similarly allowed for strategic shifts in the sites of protest (Zeitsoff 2017). Even when authorities responded with strategies to shut down communications using Internet blackouts, social media had already laid the foundation for mass dissent, allowing the opposition to instead frame this as a sign of regime weakness, further eroding its legitimacy (Toscana 2014). In other cases where regime leaders tried to misrepresent movements by describing participants as rioters, looters, or hooligans, activists rather used social media to project this image back onto the state – showing themselves engaged in peaceful acts while the state resorted to violence and oppression (McGarry et al. 2019; Kiziltunali 2020).

Resembling the Iranian mosques of the Shah era or the black Churches of the Civil Rights movement, social media seemingly enacted a multi-faceted “free space,” enabling many of the aspects of the mobilization process inhibited by the restrictive environment undergirding authoritarian regimes (Evans and Boyte 1992; Polletta 1999). Yet, over time, it became evident that such shifts in the dynamics of activism were not enough to sustain long-term change. Critics showed how this technology appeared less useful for achieving movement goals, even when they did lay the groundwork for many of the mobilizations seen in and around the Arab Spring (Morozov 2009; Gladwell 2010; Tufekci 2017).

In Egypt, for example, activists struggled to coordinate continued opposition once past the initial stage of mobilization (Tufekci 2017). Social media interactions were additionally susceptible to repression as authorities used them to spy on activists, sabotage plans, and counter discourses through propaganda and distracting arguments (Gunitsky 2015). In one estimate, it was shown that the Chinese government alone fabricates and posts around 448 million social media comments a year (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). Authoritarian leaders had matched the innovations on the side of activism with their own counter-measures, in some cases, joining forces with social media and telecommunication companies towards improved governance (Dencik and Leistert 2015; Couldry and Kallinikos 2018).

Despite not being the all-encompassing “liberation technologies” once claimed (Diamond 2010), social media scholars have nevertheless identified several advantages to subversive engagement using these platforms. Social media enables the formation of “weak ties” between disparate groups – important for building more sustained movements down the road (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In vulnerable contexts, certain advantages such as digital identity obfuscation may encourage participation from those fearing retaliation, providing a way to skirt online surveillance (Talvitie-Lamberg, Lehtinen, and Valtonen 2022). Women, in particular, have benefited from such controlled interactions in hostile contexts, finding ways to engage in contentious topics without the immediate risks associated with public discussions (Yaghoobi 2023; Kermani and Hooman 2024). Social media may thus not have replaced every step of the mobilization process, but it provides strategic interventions into particular aspects of activism such as learning, grievance formation, framing, coalition-building, and protection from state backlash. Even the sharing of seemingly banal information such as memes can have aggregate effects, creating political repertoires driving bottom-up change (Highfield 2016; Mina 2019). This goes to

show how users have learned to manipulate aspects of this technology to challenge the power of autocrats, often in unexpected and indeterminate ways.

Part II: An Affordance-Based Approach to Studying Digital Activism

The Uneven Terrain of Activism: Contingency, Flow, and Protest Waves

In many of the above examples, scholars approach social media's integration into the dynamics of dissent by looking at how its use is shaped by specific contextual needs and strategic goals. Rather than assuming social media's inherent benefits, they analyze the relational dynamics between activists, their sociopolitical environments, and their demands – highlighting how digital tools are adapted in response to these conditions, rather than serving as automatic catalysts for mobilization.

This view extends from the “dynamics of contention” school of conflict studies where “contention” comprises a package of events such as protests, riots, and revolutions – each with a series of mechanisms, processes, and episodes unfolding within them (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 24). Protest, for example, is defined as an “iterative site of interaction in which different streams of mobilization and demobilization intersect, identities form and evolve, and new forms of action are invented, honed, and rejected as actors interact with one another and with opponents and third parties” – rejecting the premise viewing these phenomena as isolated historical events (2001, 30).

Given these more nuanced understandings on the role of social media in collective action, I apply a relational approach weighing women's activism against the material and ideational components of authoritarian control. As opposed to the socio-psychological, rational, or structural approaches to movement studies which emphasize linearity in activism, I identify the contingent,

variable, and dynamic nature of Iranian women’s activism where innovations in protest follow contextual needs and historical experiences. In line with recent studies emphasizing space, emotions, performance, and the longer time horizon of movements outside of their immediate start and end points (Rossi and Halvorsen 2023), I thus show the unevenness in the landscape of women’s protests – demonstrating how each “wave” of contention develops relationally against other historical and socio-political factors towards a unique configuration of dissent.

This approach is better attuned to the processes through which a demand unfolds, highlighting factors such as context and contingency which turn that demand into action (Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013). By forging a space between structural and agential approaches to social science, relational perspectives show how actors and structures mutually constitute one another (Sewell 1992). Structures become “cultural schemas” that affect actors’ perceptions of the resources available to them (1992). Affective and emotional cues from other actors similarly trigger subsequent actions, determining the sequence of events following from them (Gillan 2020). Whereas ‘strategy’ and ‘grievance’ determine the linear process modeling approach, which shows how actors develop their responses to changes in their environments, contingency emphasizes more dynamic factors such as emotions which develop against a constantly changing environment and, in turn, shape that environment (2020).

Seeing movement as “process” entails examining the evolving interactions among movement actors and the ways these relationships shape both internal dynamics and the movement’s engagement with its broader context (della Porta 2008). It also requires situating “critical junctures” and “political opportunity structures” within the larger structural and historical forces that generate them (della Porta 2020). In his study of the Seattle WTO protests, for example, Gillan (2020) demonstrates that critiques of neoliberal policies did not emerge spontaneously but

had been developing long beforehand. Interactions between radical ecology groups, socialist organizations, and NGOs had for years shed light on the structural inequalities embedded in neoliberalist emphases on deregulation and free trade. Once an opportunity presented itself, these discourses served as a powerful “vector” around which protests coalesced, showing the contingent nature of framing – taking shape around a sequence of interactions rather than strategic deployment on the part of movement organizations (2020).

As it relates the women’s movements at the heart of this dissertation, a relational approach means acknowledging the multiple factors that converged in women’s use of digital images as a form of protest, and visual activism as an enduring “repertoire” of collective action. As Sewell puts it, there is a certain “temporal fatefulness” to events as they are profoundly dependent on a series of actions that precede them (2005, 9). In Iran, showing this temporal fatefulness would mean drawing attention to the processes undergirding a gradually repressive regime and its interactions with other technological and societal changes in the early 2000’s, forcing shifts in how women resisted limitations on their bodily autonomy. Since the “future development of repertoires depends on prior events within a specific context and on the changing efficacy of tools” in Iran (Khazraee and Losey 2016, 40–41), this approach implies historicizing and contextualizing the current wave of women’s opposition against other factors which preceded them. This, in turn, exemplifies a case of “eventful protest” whereby women’s resistance strategies evolve from a shifting political and cultural landscape and, in turn, shape that landscape (della Porta 2008). It implies that needs and tools develop against one another, showing this relationality through the micro-processes leading to the recognition of such tools, and the advantages they bring activists in particular contexts.

The Affordances of Social Media for Women's Activism in Iran

Building from this, I theorize social media's inclusion into the dynamics of dissent through a look at its affordances for activism. According to this view, social media has a set of "perceived actual or imagined properties... emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual (factors), that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, and Batlle Rubio 2023, 3178). Extending from the relational approach to social movement research, this view rejects causal outcomes, rather showing how certain elements of social media become conducive to alternative uses, combining with relational, perceptual, and contextual factors towards an outcome. Emphasizing human agency and the relationality of a given phenomenon to other social, technological, cognitive, and political factors, affordance-based approaches thus trace the "specific aspects of the product" conducive to unique practices of dissent for which they are not always intended (2023, 3178).

As it relates dissident use of social media in constrained contexts, affordance-based analyses would then suggest that subversive uses of social media exist relationally to dissident needs, the closed environments under which they operate, platform possibilities, and their own perception of those possibilities towards the formation of their grievances and the execution of their goals. This last point is crucial as actors must leverage these possibilities in their efforts to alter social processes for "without people using a technology in various ways, what it offers is meaningless" (Earl and Kimport 2011, 36).

Emerging from ecological-psychological perspectives on the relationship between a species and its environment, an affordance-based understanding shows how possibilities for action depend on whether, and how well, a species perceives the affordances available within that environment (Bucher and Helmond 2018). The term was later adopted by design studies in

thinking about the layout of a space and whether its functionality would appear obvious to the individuals inhabiting it (2018). Theorists later explored the social interactions arising from such technological affordances (Graves 2007). The affordance frame thus became a “middle term” between technology as socially constructed or materially constraining (2007). Technological innovations were not obvious from the outset, rather appearing based on repeated interactions with other users and mimicked behaviors over time (Bucher and Helmond 2018). The process through which actors made sense of the technology required attention to individual need and the affective qualities technologies presuppose outside of pure architectural intent (McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015; Nagy and Neff 2015).

Given the contingent nature of human-technology relationships, the affordance-based view would assume that social media can play into the hands of various actors, often towards conflicting goals. The “complex and at times contradictory relationship between different effects of digital technologies” makes them available to both dissidents and authoritarian governments (Tufekci 2017, 263). On the side of autocrats, the “decentralized, interactive, and non-hierarchical” nature of social media – for which they are often praised in times of mobilization – can become conducive to discourse manipulation, as regime operatives can hide in the weeds of technological interactions to shape the course of debate (Gunitsky 2015). Public communications can also give autocrats unrestrained access to a movement’s entire infrastructure – i.e. their members, strategies, and agendas – something leaders previously had to work much harder to obtain (Morozov 2011). Even the affordance of “visualizing,” which Treem and Leonardi (2012) highlight as one of the most foundational to social media usage, can act as a double-edged sword, bringing critical visibility to activist causes while, at the same time, “mak(ing) a movement transparent to its opponents, facilitating surveillance and repression” (Milan 2015, 63).

On the side of dissidents, affordances such as “persistence,” “replicability,” “scalability,” and “searchability,” for example, can enable rapid engagement around dissenting thoughts and opinions, leading to the formation of new “networked publics” that act as counterweights to authoritarian public spheres (boyd 2010). “Virality” and “creative crafting” of content can similarly engage marginalized populations such as youth in discussion and debate, contributing to broader political discourses on contentious topics (Abbas et al. 2022). In moments of repression, such affordances can penetrate the physical public sphere, as capacities for “digital observation” allow both for the “witnessing” of public injustices and its sharing online, and subsequent discussions which can trigger even more forceful actions (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014). Together, such combined usages highlight the elements of social media conducive to both resistance and repression, as similar capacities may feed into the hands of dictators towards divergent ambitions.

A Turn Towards Visual Media Affordances

Despite a broader trend in social media and activism research to account for such relational outcomes, analyzing the visual affordances of such platforms remain understudied. As Schreiber suggests, “digitally mediated communication has shifted from a primarily text-based practice to a form of multimodal, heavily visual communication – a trend accelerated by the smartphone, its ubiquitous networked camera, and fast, affordable, mobile broadband connections” (2017, 145). Visual media, therefore, now dominate the digital sphere and structure everyday communications, in addition to more complex political phenomena such as identity, subjectivity, relationality, space, and politics. Nevertheless, studies both capturing the unique affordances of such media and their historical and contextual uses – appearing beneficial to particular groups in specific historical moments – remain limited. For example, Casas and Williams (2019) highlight the mobilizational and affective qualities of visual media which make them adept at motivating participation in

movements such as Black Lives Matter, yet do not explore the evolution of the movement from mostly tweets in 2013 to a broad spanning digital-physical movement nearly ten years later where photos and videos play a dominant role in protests. Similarly, in their analysis of TikTok use around the Israel-Palestine conflict, Abbas et al. (2022) show the affordances of digital media for youth activism, but refrain from a broader discussion on why youth engage more in such visual mediums of communication versus their older, veteran counterparts.

This dissertation is thus, in part, an attempt to lessen the gap in this research by theorizing the affordances of visual media, using cases where digital images – as opposed to text-based platform features – have played a disproportionately uneven role in the dynamics of protest. However, I also seek to contextualize these affordances in the broader historical evolution of a movement operating under a constrained environment. By combining these two approaches, I show how women implicated digital image-sharing in their strategies of everyday resistance to the Iranian regime’s gender discriminatory laws. I also theorize the advantages of this media for undermining the material and ideological basis of authoritarian control, suggesting why women adopted them with higher frequency than other mediums. This simultaneously reveals the regime’s trigger points in igniting state backlash, inserting images into the broader dynamics of resistance and repression that take shape around them.

Towards the former, I ground an understanding of women’s visual protest in other social and historical factors that converged in the perceived affordances of images over other platform factors. This motivates three questions foreshadowing the remaining theorizations of this dissertation. First, how did women come to this particular form of protest? What are the historical, social, and political factors making digital image-sharing a pathway to protest in this movement, in this particular context, and not others? Compared to research on social media from political

science and social movements which have historically treated these platforms as black boxes, social media scholars have brought much needed nuance to theorizing media practices using the lens of affordances. Yet, gaps remain as these studies often do not explore how social media interacts with broader movement processes or the particular configurations of power and governance such media confront, and to what effect. Taking Khazraee and Novak’s study of *My Stealthy Freedom* (2018) – one of the three cases I explore in this dissertation – to illustrate this point, the authors show how sites such as Facebook are conducive to the formation of a transgressive collective identity, but do not connect this point to the broader implications it has in the context of a patriarchal authoritarian regime. In connecting these disparate literatures, I propose a theoretical framework attuned to both the media and power dynamics at the heart of women’s protests. By positioning questions of power and agency manifesting around women’s protests at the forefront, I capture what is at stake politically in visual protest, as much as digitally.

Such factors similarly contextualize “openings” in Iran’s political structure bringing women to digital image-sharing as a strategy of protest, leading me to ask, what, then, are the affordances of this type of mobilization? Digital images give women a particular set of advantages in Iran’s closed context. These affordances help circumvent the barriers to expression, overcoming the private-public divide undergirding a key aspect of women’s oppression, while bringing eyes to state violence. Women previously engaged in gender rebellious acts such as removing the veil in desolate public spaces, but it was only through documenting and sharing these otherwise “hidden” expressions of defiance that they turned into public acts of protest. Building on existing repertoires of resistance and taking advantage of evolutions in technology, women found a way to reinsert themselves into the public sphere which the Iranian state has long controlled through material and ideological control. Over time, these same dynamics helped women escalate the expressions of

protest proliferating across the public sphere through new discourses, strategies, and tactics of in/visibility, not only taking to but over the public sphere.

In tying the first two questions together, what then are the broader implications of visual protests for women's agency and state power? Drawing from Foucault's assertion that "where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, 95), I ask: how do visual acts of protest, in turn, challenge the efficacy of regime power and control? Across the three waves of visual protest, the state was forced to adapt to emerging modes of resistance just as often as activists adapted to new forms of repression. These interdependent processes show how actors on both sides dealt with a constantly changing environment, responding to one another towards new tactics of control. By placing the state in a position to "catch up" to dissident challenges, at times abruptly, contradictorily, and haphazardly, this process also, however, demonstrates the vulnerabilities of authoritarian control to this type of protest. Outside of the impacts on the speed and efficiency through which leaders mounted a successful repressive campaign – an indicator of the regime's health as repressive capacities are embedded in the very fabric of authoritarian governance (Maynard 2022) – such outcomes demonstrate severe anxieties on the part of leaders. They connect what is at stake in women's protests to what is at stake for the state, demonstrating how changes in the relationships between the state and gender, civil society, and resistance challenges the nature of a gender regime itself – in this case, contesting the Islamic Republic's entire revolutionary makeup as entangled with control over women.

Together, these questions ground an analysis of social media affordances in the broader dynamics of power and resistance in authoritarian contexts. They illuminate the contingent yet politically consequential processes underlying how, and why, women leverage these affordances, ultimately revealing their significance for both movement and state actors.

Part III: Highlighting the Affordances of Visibility, Hybrid Presence, Diffusion and Alternative World-Making in Iranian Women’s Media Practices

Visibility

Digitally shared images offer women in Iran four key advantages for protest. Drawing off the social media and communications literature, visibility comprises the first affordance, bringing attention to women’s issues, protests, and grievances against the state. Thompson first theorized this advantage through the concept of “mediated visibility” where “one no longer has to be present in the same spatial-temporal setting in order to see the other or to witness an action or event” (2005, 31). Over time, this observation made its way into much of the literature in showing how social media makes seen what were once “invisible” practices and relationships (Treem and Leonardi 2012; Arrivé 2020). In a more recent review of the ‘affordances’ literature, Ronzhyn et al. note that “visibility” may be thought of as “the most general affordance,” given that the “social” aspect of social media means content will always be viewed by others (2023, 3178).

In authoritarian regimes, this affordance plays several important roles. The first is recalibrating the relationship between authority and concealment through “organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden” (Pachirat 2011, 15). As Pachirat (2011) shows in his analysis of the power structures undergirding the routinized violence of a slaughterhouse, visibility reverses the gaze embedded within institutions of power as a “disciplinary mechanism” (Foucault 1975). Visualizing and “counter-visualizing” “resituate the terms on which reality is to be understood” by exposing what is deliberately obscured (Mirzoeff 2011, 28). In a context where autocrats thus systematically suppress information, visibility destabilizes one of the most important elements undergirding structural violence, triggering broader shifts in the domain through which reality is perceived and understood.

Applied to the Islamic Republic's architecture of control, visibility subverts the systematic suppression and isolation of dissent as mechanisms of control. Like most authoritarian regimes, leaders tightly regulate both incoming and outgoing information, recognizing the potential consequences of subversive ideas for the authoritarian controlled public sphere. State media thus refrain from reporting on protests and incidents that could portray the regime in a negative light. In public spaces, security forces additionally isolate violence – a particularly common practice with women where harassment and arrests are tightly contained in keeping witnesses from both seeing, and possibly, recording the incident.²

These practices create artificial boundaries between private and public life, suggesting that public spaces are highly regulated whereas, within the confines of their own homes, women are ostensibly free to do as they please.³ By making visible what are typically acts belonging to the private sphere, women thus additionally use the visibility affordance to overcome the private-public divide. For example, as my analysis of MSF shows, early images showed women engaged in “immoral” behaviors days, months, or even years earlier, before being shared publicly as a testament to “stealthy freedoms.” However, over time, women began documenting their rebellious acts in real-time, showing the gradual assertions of their identities and free expressions in public spaces where surveillance, police, and harassment are constantly present.

² For example, morality police patrol the streets with large vans as to detain those engaged in immoral behaviors. When confrontations between these forces and women unwilling to enter the van ensue, there are attempts to force women onto the vans often with the help of several police officers.

³ This is, of course, not entirely true as regime forces frequently monitor private spaces for illicit behaviors as well, raiding the homes of those thought to be engaged in mixed-sex parties or the consumption of alcohol. The borders between public and private have also been made murkier with the advent of social media. Those posting images of themselves unveiled, regardless of being in a private space, are regarded as entering the “digital public sphere” where morality rules still apply. In a case from 2018, for example, a young woman was identified and arrested by regime forces for posting videos of herself dancing at home (see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44760840>). This goes to show that private spaces are also subject to regulation where necessary for serving regime interests.

Following what McGarry et al. suggest as not just a protest “concerned with recognition,” but one aimed at “disrupt(ing) the existing political order,” this gradual public assertion of women’s rights doubly engages in the creation of new subjectivities, identities, and practices subverting the hegemonic order (2019, 16). Feminist practices often rely on exposing the different facets of gender oppression – key parts of which take place in the private sphere – through performances of gender and identity that Peggy Phelan (2003) describes as “visibility politics.” Such performances frequently play out online where social media’s visibility bind – making dissent visible and yet vulnerable to new forms of accountability on the part of state forces – highlights the invisibilized aspects of gender inequality, such as exploitation through entrenched gender practices (Wang and Tavmen 2024). They highlight issues such as sexual assault and gender discrimination which are often publicly suppressed, making what is a “private matter” – something to be handled discreetly, if at all – a public reclamation of rights (O’Halloran and Cook 2024). Engaging what Clark-Parsons describes as a “representational struggle aimed at exposing power so that it may be transformed,” visibility thus alters women’s relationships with body and space – both of which undergird the creation of the gender order (2021, 364).

Such acts often engage the very mechanisms of authoritarian repression making them “private matters,” using practices of counter-visualization. Women’s posts frequently recount encounters with the morality police, sharing experiences of harassment, intimidation, and violence for violating public morality laws. By making visible the state’s coercive apparatus – an apparatus that thrives on the disproportionate power to surveil – these posts reverse that power dynamic, challenging who gets to watch and who is watched. Some content includes covert recordings of confrontations with religious enforcers and passersby attempting to impose compliance by threatening police intervention, engaging in verbal or physical abuse, or recording women

themselves as “evidence” of immoral behavior. By documenting and circulating these moments in real time, women weaponize visibility as a deterrent, sometimes halting aggressors mid-act in engaging a form of “counter-surveillance” which turns the “gaze” of the state onto itself (Mirzoeff 2012, 16).

Tina Askanius (2019) discusses the use of visual “testimonies” as a form of citizen media practice, where the recorder “bears witness” to an act, within which lies power and agency. By using digital recordings to display a counter-reality, citizens are thus endowed with a new form of capital “that has the potential to challenge and provide a counter-gaze to that of entrenched powers” (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014, 758). Other posts showing women dancing, biking, or singing in crowded spaces similarly play with this surveillant-surveilled bind, embracing visibility to display women’s resistant acts despite being at a heightened risk of being seen. Through the production of visual testimonies, counter-surveillant practices, and counter-gazes, women thus leverage visibility to lay claims onto public space. They bring visibility to the state’s spacio-temporal practices of control which relies on a combination of laws, surveillance, punitive forces, ordinary civilians, discourses, and other practices to guide women’s public behaviors - making the state, instead of them, the subject of surveillance and scrutiny.

Hybrid Presence

The second media affordance extends from physically embedded acts as they merge with digital visual expression. Social media relies on an “augmented” representation of reality where the physical and digital spheres intertwine despite being conceived of as separate entities (Jurgenson 2012). This gives platform communications a hybrid quality by, for example, structuring user interactions around who they know or affiliate with offline, making “identities and

socialities co-constituted” (Schreiber 2017, 145). At the same time, social media distorts elements such as time and space, as what is created in a given moment may reach its viewer much later, giving content a long “shelf-span” that often exceeds its creator’s intentions (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2013). Digital interactions thus constantly adapt to such “transformed material conditions and emergent norms” with new practices playing on how actors express and make themselves visible in the digital public realm (della Porta 2019). The infamous “selfie,” for example, emerged as a practice of self-expression unique to social media (Tifentale and Manovich 2015). Digital engagement forces new, often contingent expressions of self, place, and other, merging with online/offline elements towards new social configurations.

In Iran, the hybrid nature of digital platforms affords women the possibilities to renegotiate the advantages and disadvantages of social media visibility. Both on and offline, women in Iran face a constantly evolving carceral state which makes them vulnerable to identification and arrest (Iddins 2020). Thus, while visibility enables the publicization of “stealthy freedoms” as a challenge to the state’s management of space and women’s bodies, it can also work against women by triggering the state’s repressive arm – affording it new forms of visibility adept at monitoring women for expressions of dissent.

The visibility bind can additionally bring the wrong kind of attention to those posting online. By encouraging visibility as an inherent part of its “logic,” social media ultimately drives shares and likes through the potential for virality (van Dijck and Poell 2013). But this same logic may make users vulnerable to harassment and societal backlash by bringing them the wrong kind of exposure, forcing users to adopt creative tactics in staving off such criticisms (Duffy and Hund 2019).

As a result, Iranian women force a balance between being visible and too visible by obfuscating physical features that could make them vulnerable to identification and arrest. Rather than posting on personal accounts, they additionally share their images on third-party pages acting as “middlemen” between women and the platform, disconnecting them from the potential for identification. In some cases, women are not present in or around the content at all. Videos shared of their interactions with the morality police and public harassers are often filmed from a first-person perspective wherein women are present only auditorily, drawing attention to perpetrators instead. Such “tactics of invisibility” allow them to negotiate, or altogether sidestep, their identities in amplifying the advantages of social media visibility while deflecting its harms (Talvitie-Lamberg, Lehtinen, and Valtonen 2022).

As a “hybrid space,” social media better allows for this type of negotiated presence – something much more difficult to achieve in physical, public space where the dissenting body, regardless of how well obscured, is always subject to repression. By making activism safer, this form of presence additionally enables women to “up the ante” on rebellious acts. The temporal evolution of women’s protest images shows that making rebellion an increasingly public act is a large part of how women challenge the Iranian regime’s material and ideological control. This requires a gradual courageousness on the part of women, taking to more crowded locations over time where surveillance is more common. In some protest iterations, women engage in rebellious acts in close proximity to the police, the religious clergy (which often plays a role in women’s subjugation), and public propaganda such as signs reminding women to observe the hijab. Such acts manipulate the temporal and material layout of public space by partaking in a subversive action momentarily before fleeing the scene and only making that action viewable online, making repression in real-time difficult. Furthermore, since no authoritarian regime possesses the

resources to monitor and respond to all defiant acts, digital dissemination exploits this limitation, exposing the regime's inability to maintain total control of public space. By leveraging social media as a hybrid space, women thus evade repression while mocking the limits of authoritarian oversight, bringing new challenges to authoritarian control.

These acts – often taken for the camera as opposed to captured as second-hand artefacts of an event – give protest a performative nature, whereby women engage with the hybrid nature of digital visibility to highlight aspects of their oppression and everyday experiences with gender discrimination. Given that gender is a performed and spatially embedded practice (Butler 1990), women use social media to appropriate body and space towards new iterations of “self” constructed in relation to offline locations (Schwartz and Halegoua 2015). These performances disrupt gender norms, social expectations, and the private-public divide that structures gender subjugation, while simultaneously giving protest a “shock” factor that intrigues the viewer, engaging them through what they view as an act of rebellion against authority (Hintz 2015). Like other feminist protests where public performances have been key to subverting aspects of gender oppression,⁴ such acts leverage the very mechanisms of state power used to ensure compliance, to instead challenge the gender order – enacting new subjectivities, identities, and relations in the process.

⁴ One example is the Chilean “Rapist In Your Path” protests where women staged choreographed performances in public spaces that were later shared online, blending sexually subversive gender identities with symbolic representations of rape culture to expose and challenge the institutions normalizing violence against women. See: Martin, Deborah, and Deborah Shaw. 2021. “Chilean and Transnational Performances of Disobedience: Las Tesis and the Phenomenon of Un Violador En Tu Camino.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 40 (5): 712–29, and Snyder, Cara, Ana Veiga, and Cristina Wolff. 2018. “‘América Latina Vai Ser Toda Feminista’: Visualizing & Realizing Transnational Feminisms in the Women’s Worlds March for Rights.” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, October.

Diffusion

Oliver and Meyer describe diffusion as the “process whereby past events make future events more likely” (2003, 174). Central to the study of collective action, authoritarianism, revolutions, and the processes of democratization, diffusion explains how conflict dynamics and protest strategies spread from one context to another, enabling the transmission of “innovative ideas, products, policies, institutions, or repertoires of behavior” driving similar outcomes (Bunce and Koesel 2013, 753). This process captures the pedagogical processes often preceding large-scale events whereby actors emulate and adapt strategies perceived as effective elsewhere. As it regards social media, the transnational communicative affordances of digital platforms engage a large part of this process, playing a crucial role in the diffusion of ideas, frames, and repertoires of action driving the speed of change.

For example, as della Porta and Mattoni (2014) illustrate, ideas of participatory democracy, deliberation, and direct action spread transnationally from the 1990s through the mid-2010s, propelled in part by digital technologies that facilitated the circulation of discourses and mobilizational strategies. During the Arab Spring, Tunisian activists drew on the idea of bottom-up collective action from past movements, before motivating the adoption of similar tactics in Egypt. These practices then influenced Spain’s Indignados movement, where decentralized forms of mobilization gained prominence. Spanish activists, in turn, inspired counterparts in Greece, whose tactics would later echo in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Many of these strategies can be traced back to the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests, which helped popularize decentralized, direct-action models of protest. In short, similar discourses and tactics shaped activism across diverse contexts, illustrating a process of collective learning in which activists observed, shared, and repurposed effective approaches from other movements.

In addition to cross-border adaptations, movement actors additionally learn from one another internally as ideas spread visually and discursively between them. Social psychologists and technology scholars have shown how social media – especially visual media – have motivated behavioral changes as “people can learn new information and behaviors through observation” (Stokes and Price 2017, 159). Through repetition, replicability, and scalability – all affordances that may lead to the formation of “networked publics” (boyd 2010) – rapidly moving content can shape information and learning (Gleason 2013; Kotaman and Şener 2023). As “pieces of cultural information... gradually scaling into a shared social phenomenon,” memes, for example, can shape the culture and behavior of particular groups, motivating large-scale changes emulating the movement process (Shifman 2013, 18). Memes can have aggregate effects in shaping norms and beliefs among actors, as feedback mechanisms such as likes and shares teach users what is attractive, motivating similar cultural practices over time (Mina 2019).

In authoritarian contexts where centralized planning, meetings, and tactical coordination are unilaterally blocked, such processes can motivate new forms of organization whereby actors learn to exploit cracks in the system – engaging in actions that, while seemingly isolated, become models for others to replicate. These bottom-up processes motivate new cultures of defiance, where the repeated enactment of resistance provokes meaningful change without simultaneously provoking immediate state repression (Noakes and Teets 2020; Lilja 2021). In places where authoritarian leaders are paranoid to such challenges – employing demobilization strategies, spreading disinformation, and shielding themselves from criticism (Bunce and Koesel 2013) – such “under-the-radar” resistance can shift structural dynamics while evading detection. As Bayat (1998; 2013) notes, it is precisely this quiet encroachment that allows for subversion in tightly controlled environments.

In Iran, images become central to similar processes of diffusion, transmitting ideas and norms that gradually shape collective action. Women engaged in a form of collective learning by observing the actions of others online – replicating and adapting them without the need for physical co-presence. This “digitally mediated solidarity” (Stewart and Schultze 2019) allowed practices of resistance to spread across time and space. Culturally resonant content, amplified by social media’s attention-driven algorithms, helped signal which performances, discourses, and tactics gained traction. Together, these dynamics fostered a shared repertoire of collective action without leadership or hierarchy, reinforcing patterns of visual resistance that multiplied across platforms and contexts.

This type of learning filled the gap between collective action and everyday resistance models, exemplifying the ways individuals challenge and subvert power using the visual, discursive, and dispersed nature of social media. Whereas collective action typically relies on centralized, hierarchical coordination and everyday resistance involves subtle, often unconscious acts of defiance, visual protest occupies a middle ground. The diffusion of ideas, norms, and actions across a hybrid, temporally uneven platform “scale up” towards the creation of a mass movement (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018). Combined with visibility which makes seen that which is meant to be hidden (Pachirat 2011), and the hybrid nature of social media, relying on physical actions captured and shared digitally, diffusion coordinates and gives meaning to such acts. It collectivizes otherwise isolated instances of resistance and adapts them to time and place, shaping the trajectory of future resistant acts.

Collective learning simultaneously fosters coalition-building and kinship around women’s resistant acts – overcoming the lack of organizational resources and physical spaces where women can come together around common beliefs. By witnessing one another engaged in resistant acts,

women create a collective identity that supplants the hierarchical creation of identities and norms that often pervades physical spaces. Performed together, these decentralized actions strengthen connections between women across a temporally uneven space, fostering a sense of belonging to a broader “collective” in ways that reinforce the social norms and values that shape participation within the movement. In their study of Black Lives Matter, Mundt et al. (2018) exemplify this process by showing how social media’s “salience of connectivity” enables the connections scaling movement tactics and a shared movement identity. As they note: “BLM groups perceive themselves to be part of a larger BLM movement, in large part because of relationships formed through social media platforms. This sense of connectivity points to an important benefit of social media for strengthening and scaling social movements: the possibility of helping far-flung activists develop a sense of collective identity” (2018, 11-12).

Alternative World-Making

Driven by a vision in which the problems of the present moment no longer apply, movements are oriented to the future by nature (Yates et al. 2024). Across how movement actors organize, strategize, and “perform” in the present, this orientation appears as a way to align the means with the ends of a movement (Muñoz 2009; Yates 2014). In African American, queer, and minority struggles for liberation, these practices emerge as acts of joy and dance, communal ownership, and radical labor practices imagining “world, life, and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014, 3). Enacting the goals of the future in the present moment, these practices embody the aspirations of the movement, bringing “those possible futures ‘back’ to work on the present, to inspire action, and new forms of solidarity” (2014, 3, emphasis theirs).

Since the 1970's, prefiguration has become a conceptual term to encapsulate the practices aligning present and future in many "new" social movements. Offering a theoretical framework for thinking about the "Marxist dilemma" of aligning the instrumental tasks of a revolutionary movement with its goals (Boggs 1977b), prefiguration was first defined as the "embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977a, 100). Studies emphasized the tactical as well as affective qualities of a movement (Yates 2014), taking shape around two theoretical and practical commitments: one of "doing" protest – where features such as decentralized planning are the movement's ideology (Graeber 2002) – and the other of enacting an "alternative world" outside of present cultural and political practices (Epstein 1991). In both, actors believe that "more and more people will choose the movement's alternative institutions and modes of interaction until they gradually replace those of the old system" (Leach 2013, 2), engaging visions for a future utopia already taking place in the present.

In contemporary feminist media practices, such prefigurative practices underly how actors challenge dominant gender and hierarchical norms. By reimagining the material and ideational production of bodies and their relationship to space, performances of equality and justice radically reconstruct the gendered conceptions of the "public sphere" in the present (Foellmer, Lünenborg, and Raetzsch 2017). Since "identities are not simply performed in space but are implicated in the production of space" (Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014, 24, emphasis theirs), practices visualizing and exposing gendered constructs simultaneously engage in alternative gendered relationships and modes of public presence. By prefiguring new social relationships, these practices embed organizing in a kind of politics centered on reclaiming humanity and self (Lin et al. 2016). In authoritarian contexts where media is censored and public spaces are monitored, such strategies

further give women a voice in the construction of national narratives, redrawing the boundaries on private and public life, while preemptively laying claims to the futures gendered subjects seek to create (2016).

Iranian women similarly engage in prefigurative practices by deliberately documenting themselves performing acts deemed illegal by the state, aligning future aspirations with present actions. Their images envision a world in which such behaviors – unveiling, dancing, mingling with men in non-sanctioned relationships – are not only permitted but normalized. In the process, they engage feelings of joy, freedom, and solidarity in defiance of the regime’s moral and legal strictures, surpassing limitations on their bodily autonomy and expression in the present moment. In doing so, they reimagine the public sphere as inclusive of individual expression, while simultaneously dismantling the ideological underpinnings that criminalize such acts in the eyes of the state. These practices expose both the limitations of the regime’s surveillance apparatus and the fragility of its moral authority, revealing that public order does not collapse when women transgress gendered mandates, that there are those who do not buy into the regime’s view of morality, and that homegrown initiatives can exist outside the East/West paradigm.

Alternative gender norms and practices, as disseminated through images, thus directly challenge the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, undermining one of its most significant pillars of legitimacy as a modern authoritarian state. While in many Latin American authoritarian regimes, women have strategically leveraged aspects of the existing gender ideology – or the regime’s treatment of labor, ethnic, or religious minorities – to advance their claims (Noonan 1995), Iranian women work outside the regime’s framework towards the construction of a radically different ideological framework. Through alternative world-making practices, women generate new gender discourses, norms, and social relations that reshape how gender and sexuality

are framed, both in the digital sphere and in offline male-female interactions. By asserting agency over these domains, they pose a direct challenge to the Islamic Republic's authority, which has long sought to define and regulate them as part of its broader ideological project.

Conclusion

By leveraging these four affordances, Iranian women use the visibility of defiant acts performed in physical spaces and disseminated across the digital public sphere to enact a multifaceted challenge to the regime. Using the image as a hybrid space allows them to make visible both their resistance and perceived gender oppression – both of which the state keeps hidden through tactics of control and surveillance. Given this context, the image further allows women to manipulate aspects of their identity that could be used to identify them – being “present” in protest while withholding key physical features. Hybrid presence additionally allows for the decentralized creation of new norms, discourses, relationalities, and performative practices, engaging movement processes of learning and strategizing without the need to physically be together in time and place. Imagining, creating, and asserting a right to public space through such performative practices further aligns the ends with the means of activism, circumventing the limitations on gender expression and bodily autonomy to live out future goals in the present moment.

As this chapter foreshadowed, digital image-sharing emerged against a backdrop of other historical and contextual factors towards becoming a mode of protest for women in Iran. The following chapter details this evolution by situating women's resistance efforts in a broader history of women's pushback to the Islamic Republic, showing how past strategies, events, and political developments shaped the conditions for visuals to emerge as an alternative strategy of protest.

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CHAPTER 3: NAVIGATING THE IRANIAN GENDER REGIME: WOMEN'S RESISTANCE AND STATE REPRESSION FROM 1979-2014

In 2023, a court handed down a six-month sentence to a woman disobeying mandatory hijab laws, citing her need for treatment of a “no-hijab infectious disease” (Rezaei 2023). In the same order, the court additionally issued her a two-year travel ban for concerns that Western forces would “exploit this illness, furthering their anti-Iranian agenda within Iranian society” (2023).

Regime leaders have long tied women's noncompliance to the hijab and other public morality laws to a Western “cultural invasion,” seeking to uproot Islamic ideals of womanhood in place of a “banal” understanding of “Western freedom” (Mir-Hosseini 2021, 57). In the beginning of the revolution, “women's rights” were painted as a Western ploy to abuse women's bodies towards consumeristic goals. As a result, women under the new republic were told they “would no longer stand for protest, defiance, and justice, but for chastity, piety, and submission” (2021, 54). Over time, this rhetoric has been shaped around current trends, painting defiant women as “agents of the West.” As Ayatollah Khamenei often reiterates, women's challenges to the hijab are part of the “Zionist plot to corrupt involvement of women in society” (*Khamenei.Ir* 2017). They extend from “the billions of dollars” he claims Western powers spend to “promote nudity in society” (*Khamenei.Ir* 2018), portraying challenges to the hijab, women's movements, and feminism as foreign and, more importantly, as inauthentic to the Iranian Islamic project.

Although regime leaders often position calls for gender equality as foreign-backed, Western ideas, this chapter shows how Iranian women have mobilized since the beginning of the revolution, looking to their lived experiences to shape their priorities while creatively shifting strategies in response to changes in the political context. Leaders have developed new methods to respond to these bottom-up demands – including by obfuscating this history to label women's

activists and their ideals as inauthentic, foreign, and a threat to societal order – yet women have also found new ways to respond to such challenges with their own discourses, practices, and tactics – showing the interactive nature of women’s resistance with state repression.

In framing women’s acts of disobedience as Western conspiracies, the Iranian regime reveals a deeper dialectical relationship, as Hamid Dabashi (2017) argues – one in which the state’s fixation on the West becomes essential to the construction of its own identity. A similar dynamic underpins the relationship between women’s resistance and the state, where each side continually reacts to and reshapes the other. Women assert their agency by devising new and creative strategies of resistance to the state’s gender ideology and practices of authoritarian control. Yet the perceived threat of these acts – particularly given the foundational role of gender in the regime’s ideological framework – pushes the state to adapt as well, developing new methods to suppress and delegitimize these resistant acts before they can proliferate towards a formidable challenge to the regime.

This chapter shows how this relationship unfolds through an examination of two historical time periods. The first traces the development of gender as a technology of control, showing how leaders of the Islamic Revolution redefined gender norms and embedded them within the institutions, social relations, and everyday practices of the new regime. Women responded to this new infrastructure of gendered control with different strategies – at times working within the framework of the Islamic Republic to exercise agency and, in others, manipulating aspects of its ideology to advance their right. Over time, these strategies evolved into extra-institutional challenges, culminating in a new mode of embodied protest pushing back at the symbolic and material dimensions of state power. The second part of this chapter explores the political, technological, and visual transformations of the decade preceding this shift, showing how women

took cues from their changing environment by exploiting emerging cracks in the system towards new forms of protest centered on demands for equality, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution and The Rise of a New Gender-Spatial Order

Following months of protests and turmoil, the Islamic Revolution finally reached its climax on February 11, 1979, leading to the exile of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran's Western-backed ruler, and the arrival of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to the seat of power. Previously exiled himself for political and religious provocations, Khomeini had spent years delivering sermons from Paris, condemning the Shah for corrupting Iran's sanctity by aligning with the West under the guise of modernization. Upon his return to Tehran, Khomeini was welcomed to lead Iran's transition to the Islamic Republic as a watchful guide. However, his role quickly expanded beyond that of a transitional leader as he consolidated power and ruled as Iran's supreme authority until his death in 1989. Under his leadership, sweeping pronouncements – particularly those concerning women – began to emerge and expanded over time to include new regulations on all facets of public life. Such pronouncements signaled that the revolution was no longer just a political transformation but one that was profoundly shaping Iranian society and culture as well.

Only a few days after setting foot in Tehran, Khomeini famously decreed that women should observe an “Islamic criteria of dress” (Childress 2011, 60). Two weeks later, he announced an end to the Family Protection Laws, the hallmark women's reform package under the Shah. A few days after that, female judges were barred from their positions and finally, in early March, female workers were told they would be required to don the religious headscarf in their workplaces (Paidar 1995, 231–32). These pronouncements were in stark contrast to his endearing messages of

support to Iranian women while in Paris, often referring to him as his sisters. Reforms to the economy, education, and entertainment sectors, and even the ratification of the Islamic Republic (which came nearly two months after the revolution) did not appear as significant to establishing the newfound regime as was the role and, by consequence, appearance of women.

Taken by surprise, thousands of women staged mass protests in Tehran on March 8th, coinciding with International Women's Day, shouting that they "did not have a revolution to go backward" (Shahidian 2002, 99). Protesters were met with mobs of Khomeini supporters, attacking them with clubs and broken bottles, on the pretext that their demands were relics of the Shah's imperialist past (Paidar 1995).⁵ Demonstrations were thus swiftly put out as additionally, both Khomeini's faction had by then gained more power and Leftist groups remained indifferent to the plight of women, viewing their protests as dangerous for a budding revolution (Moghissi 1996). This allowed Khomeini to move forward with several gender-specific decrees, placing women at the forefront of the revolution as symbolic canvases of reform.

After initially turning back on the hijab decree on the grounds that it was a mere "recommendation" and most probably would only apply to women working in government offices, Khomeini and his faction initiated a series of other laws targeting education, transport, and the organization of public space and public male-female interactions around Islamic morality more broadly (Nashat 1980; Shahidian 2002). Women were banned from around half of the professions

⁵ In many ways, they were. There is little evidence to suggest all women shared in these concerns or that there was unity among women at different racial, ethnic, religious, and political intersections when the March 8th protests, and subsequent pushback, ensued. In fact, Guity Nashat notes that the sense of betrayal and worry once Khomeini's proclamations came out was "particularly strong among educated women in the professions and white-collar jobs, university students, and many who had affiliations with political groups that had worked to gain freedom for everyone" (1980, 174). Connecting this to the fact that such middle and upper class women comprised a small portion of the population – for example, in 1977, the middle class made up only about 6.7 percent of the total labor force (presumably women made up a much lesser percentage) (Abrahamian 1980) – it is most likely the case that the majority of religious, lower class women supported these regulations, or at the very least, were indifferent to them.

they held before the revolution and purged from an additional 78 out of 169 educational career paths, including engineering and technical degrees (Shaditalab 2005). Women who had previously held posts in top-ranking government offices were demoted to more “clerical” support roles (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982). They were also told they would no longer be allowed to enter sports stadiums nor compete in public sports tournaments (Nashat 1980). Even traveling abroad became restricted as women were newly required to gain permission from a male guardian for all foreign travel (Mahdi 2003).⁶

By the summer of 1980, the veil was declared mandatory in all government workplaces. Over 2,000 women protested this decree, but to no avail as those who refused to cover their hair were promptly fired (Paidar 1995). In 1983, the hijab became legally obligatory for all women, regardless of profession or religious background, effectively making their entrance into the public sphere contingent on adherence to a specific dress code. Shahidian (2002) argues that this marked a departure from the Shah’s model of “public patriarchy,” in which he positioned himself as the protector of women, toward a system of “private patriarchy,” where women were relegated to the household under the authority of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Pahlavi rule had, at one point, banned women from appearing in public with the headscarf at all in modernizing and Westernizing the country under his guise. This move also “saved” women from the religious, backwards guidelines of clerics and their religious edicts (Paidar 1995). Nevertheless, as Afary

⁶ This is not to suggest that the declaration and administration of such decrees were smooth processes. There were disagreements between Khomeini and other factions of the regime on such measures, leading to additional discrepancies that women had to navigate. For example, after Khomeini initially announced the nullification of the Family Protection Laws and announced women’s need to observe the hijab, the interim government led by Prime Minister Bazargan assured women that these were merely suggestions rather than enforcements (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982). President Bani Sadr then mediated between them in trying to present the hijab as a force of revolutionary preservation, countering Western imperial capitalism (Paidar 1995). Tabari and Yeganeh (1982) argue that such inconsistencies created an air of general confusion, delaying any possibilities for women’s mass mobilization while simultaneously allowing Khomeini and his faction to advance on their propositions.

(2009) argues, “the 1979 Islamic Revolution was not a wholesale return to the past” in undoing the rhetorical and invasive gestures of the Shah in a pure act of de-Westernization. It was rather the creation of a new “regime of truth” – one that reinterpreted and expanded retrogressive gender and cultural norms through the use of "modern technologies of power" (265).

Two interrelated aspects of that technology were gender segregation and the hijab. As spaces were segregated along gender lines, access to them also became contingent on whether and how well women abided by hijab and other laws. Many parks, for instance, were shut down in Tehran following reports that unveiled women were entering them, effectively communicating to women that their entry depended on their wearing of the headscarf (Paidar 1995). Airports were similarly restricted to veiled women as was access to social services (1995). The segregation of public spaces and the simultaneous enforcement of the hijab connected space and body in a new “embodied spatial practice” where the veil became as much an extension of spatial segregation as a product of it (Gökarıksel 2020).

Within these practices laid a subtle reshaping of gender and sexuality that, together with questions of access, categorized women as good and pious or objects of Westernized desire (K. S. Batmanghelichi 2022). Women who wore the chador (the full-body veil that became emblematic of the Islamic Republic post-revolution) or veiled properly, prevented the simultaneous sexual promiscuity of men. Because it was believed that men could become easily distracted by a woman’s body, the veil acted as a physical barrier between the sexes where the complete segregation of women and men in public was not practical. Not only then was a woman’s gender asserted through her attire, but she also became the guardian of man’s sexuality through her protection of his gaze.

Surveillance became the third tool, alongside segregation and the hijab, to police male-female interactions. Young patrols tasked with protecting the ideals of the revolution monitored public spaces to prevent deviant interactions. The consequences for breaking these laws were high. Arbitrary detentions and prosecutions coupled with a punishment of 74 lashes for those who failed to comply with hijab laws were administered as appropriate punishments (Naghbi 2007). Public policing served as another form of surveillance, operating under the banner of “promoting virtue and preventing vice” (Afary 2009). This citizen-to-citizen monitoring campaign encouraged individuals to intervene in acts deemed immoral or culturally deviant while reinforcing and rewarding behaviors aligned with the state’s moral and religious ideals. Together, such tools ensured compliance to the hijab and the new spatio-cultural practices emerging under Khomeini’s leadership.

For their part, women faced significant constraints in mounting an effective resistance. Decades of social and political repression under the Shah had stifled the development of an independent feminist consciousness (Zahedi 2007). As a result, there was no autonomous women’s movement capable of countering the regime’s overtures on women’s rights (Yeganeh 1982). It was only once Khomeini announced a series of gender-specific laws that women’s repression became tied to their gender identities. However, by that point, women were already being silenced en masse and the very political parties that had once been instrumental in mobilizing women remained passive in the face of their suppression. The increasingly repressive environment made it “obvious that mass demonstration was not going to be an accepted means of oppositional protest in a post-revolutionary society” (Paidar 1995, 235–36). Women’s protests thus “lost momentum and their diverse mass participation ended” (1995).

Chasing Equality Under Sharia: Making the Islamic Republic Compatible with Women's Rights

By the mid-1980s, the focus had shifted from domestic repression to war, as thousands of young men were mobilized to defend Iran following Saddam Hussein's attack just seven months after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. With the Veiling Act firmly in place as the last major blanket policy restricting women's agency,⁷ many women had already assumed their prescribed roles as "dutiful wives and mothers" in support of the war effort. Yet their contributions extended far beyond the home. Women played critical roles in everything from direct combat to caring for the wounded (Farzaneh 2021). According to one estimate, "for every male who fought in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), there were at least one and very likely two, three, or four females who helped him fight it" (2021, 1).

These new roles became the foundation for a new kind of pushback to the regime. Women not only endured a rapidly shifting social and cultural landscape but also suffered immense personal losses during the war. With thousands of husbands, sons, brothers, and other male relatives killed over the course of eight years, many women found themselves as the new heads of their households – a role they did not fail to put into question when changes to the Family Protection Laws made men, instead of women, the rightful guardians of children in the case of divorce or death (Keddie 2000). This obvious contradiction in the regime's policies – mobilizing women to support the war effort then denying them custody of their own children when their husbands died in battle – forced the regime to concede on its earlier position, eventually granting women custody of their children. At the same time, however, the regime's structure was beginning

⁷ A few women were elected to Iranian parliament in the early years of the Islamic Republic, but their participation was "inconsequential because they were basically 'ya-sayers' to the male decision-makers" (Mahdi 2003, 52). In this sense, there were no significant legislative changes that positively impacted women nor were there any more severe than compulsory veiling.

to show gaping holes as a result of women's earlier exclusion from key bureaucratic and legislative positions. The lack of female personnel created logistical challenges in implementing the regime's social and political reforms, opening an opportunity for women's inclusion back into the system. As newly stated clerks and advisors, many of these women went on to oversee family courts dealing with child custody cases, at times helping to equalize women's household roles (2000).

Women also began pursuing education in unprecedented numbers which fostered new religious interpretations, new interactions between previously isolated women and girls, and a distinct gender consciousness. After an initial three-year shutdown and "restructuring" period, universities reopened in 1983 (Rezai-Rashti 2015). The regime viewed education as a tool for ideological indoctrination, using religious rhetoric, sex-based curricula, and Islamic societal values to reinforce its authority (Keddie 2000). However, this approach had unintended consequences. Many women from traditional and religious backgrounds who had been largely excluded from education under the Shah were now encouraged to attend schools and universities. Their families, reassured by the enforcement of veiling, gender-segregated spaces, and religiously aligned curricula, felt comfortable sending their daughters to pursue higher education (Rezai-Rashti 2015). As a result, a new class of "Islamic feminists" well-versed in the Quran surfaced, at times using this knowledge to challenge the regime's restrictive pronouncements on gender (Badran 2005; Mahmoudi 2019).

Khomeini's policies *on* women consequently made them aware of their status *as* women, deepening a budding feminist consciousness developing through the female religious centers and newfound educational opportunities that women had to discuss gender-specific themes (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982; Zahedi 2007). Within these centers, women formed groups mixing secular and religious ideological orientations to deliberate changes to gender laws (Mojab 2001; Mahmoudi

2019). For example, key to passing a “Wages for Housework” (*Orjat ol-mesal*) law was a coalition of women from both Islamist and secular camps who campaigned for it in 1991. This law held that women were entitled to payment for their household labor given that Islam does not require women to perform these tasks, making it no different from other forms of work. Despite hostility and conservative pushback, parliamentary members could not prove that the law went against Islam, allowing it to pass in 1992 (Hoodfar 1999). Women’s magazines dedicated to topics from religion to motherhood also appeared during this time, as did articles from notable figures such as Shirin Ebadi, the first female judge of Iran and later Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Such articles discussed women’s rights in marriage and the household, fusing feminist aspirations and ideas with religious and legal expertise (Keddie 2000).

These were important steps towards ideas to *reform* the system which emerged as a dominant strand of pushback in the early 1990’s. After a ceasefire in the late 1980’s finally brought the Iran-Iraq War to an end, Iran’s economy was in shambles. This provoked a softening of the regime’s ideological position and hardline approach in dealing with the situation, ushering in a new era of market liberalization under the leadership of President Rafsanjani in 1989 (Rakel 2008). The newfound educational opportunities of the 1980’s preparing women for various public and private sector jobs, coupled with a wrecked economy, motivated some leaders to encourage, and even mobilize, women into the workforce (Moghissi 1996). Prompting improvements in material wealth after a decade of war, such changes brought popularity to the political faction backing them, paving the way for Mohammad Khatami’s subsequent presidential win in 1997.

Khatami campaigned on a platform of expanding Iran’s engagement with the outside world, emphasizing human rights, the rule of law, and democracy as central to his vision (Keddie 2000). After winning, he made the development of an Iranian “civil society” (a term he popularized) a

priority of his administration. Dozens of reform-centered publications (29 of which were dedicated exclusively to women) and civil society organizations – nonprofits, society centers, etc. – surfaced during his tenure (Mahdi 2003). Such changes spurred new debates and ideas, theorizing an “alternative to the ruling elite’s approach” on how to achieve Islamic liberation from the Western order (Keddie 2006, 281). New coalitions, also comprised of women who had initially helped elect Khatami,⁸ formed around such ideas, pursuing possibilities for change through the regime’s institutional framework.

The Women’s Caucus of Iran’s Sixth Parliament

Perhaps no coalition better exemplifies efforts for civil change than the “Women’s Caucus” of Iran’s Sixth Parliament. Comprised of 38 women – including prominent women’s rights activists such as Shirin Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kar, and Zahra Rahnavard – the caucus worked to advance legislative reforms that would improve women’s rights and status under the Republic. This coalition emerged alongside the 2000 parliamentary elections which ushered in a wave of reformist lawmakers who, like Khatami, appeared committed to democratic ideals. Using a two-pronged approach, the caucus focused on both increasing women’s representation in political office and reforming Iran’s legislative framework to align more closely with gender equality.

Towards the first approach, the caucus criticized many of Khatami’s ministerial picks based on their positions on women’s rights, lobbying him to nominate more women to his cabinet (Moghadam and Haghightajoo 2016). They put pressure on male reformist parliamentary members to support these ministerial selections and urged the selection of women candidates to other positions of political power. This resulted in several women being elected or appointed to various

⁸ Eighty-eight percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 1997 election, becoming one of the highest voter turnout rates under the Islamic Republic’s history, with forty percent of those votes cast by women (Hoodfar 1999, 40).

positions such as Massoumeh Ebtekar, the first woman to hold the post of vice president under the Islamic Republic (2016). One woman was given a seat on the Council of Experts, a legislative body overseeing the office of the Supreme Leader, while several others, including Khatami's sister, were elected to municipal councils throughout Iran (Mahdi 2003). Despite the caucus's persistent lobbying efforts, the president did not appoint any female ministers, but several members of his cabinet did agree to appoint more women to "middle managerial" positions, giving them more leadership roles (Moghadam and Haghightjoo 2016).

Towards the second approach, the caucus reformed, repealed, and enacted laws giving women a more equal footing in the regime's legal framework. In 1999, President Khatami insisted in a speech that men and women were equal under Islam (Mahdi 2003). In aligning his position with the practical implications of public policy on women's lives, the caucus used the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a baseline for a "rights-oriented" approach to women's status (Sameh 2019). They campaigned around "legal reforms, civil and political rights... hence several campaigns against discriminatory laws, policies, and violent or oppressive traditional customs" (Tohidi 2016, 79).

For women like Shirin Ebadi, whose lifelong work was proving the compatibility of women's rights with Islam, this period marked a crucial opportunity to codify legal protections for women within the Islamic legal framework (Sameh 2019). Ebadi, along with other members of the caucus, thus focused on reversing the rollbacks to the Family Protection Laws imposed by Khomeini after the revolution. They pushed for Iran's ratification of CEDAW and challenged blatantly discriminatory laws that granted men undue advantages in marriage, divorce, and child custody proceedings (Moghadam and Haghightjoo 2016; Sameh 2019). As a result, they succeeded in changing the legal age for girls getting married from 9 to 13, women and girls were

given permission to travel abroad for study without prior male authorization, and women gained greater leverage in divorce and child custody proceedings (2016).

As Tohidi point out, an emphasis on women's legal reform under a dictatorial patriarchal state might seem counterintuitive, but is actually "quite radical in a repressive and retrogressive religious state" (2016, 79). Rather than challenging the Islamic Republic outright, women adopted a strategy of pursuing "incremental gains, empower(ing) local groups, and aim(ing) for small but sustainable changes" (Mahdi 2003, 67). This approach became even more crucial as significant obstacles emerged, making more radical transformations difficult. Ayatollah Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader in 1989, along with his conservative allies, viewed the shifting political and cultural landscape as a direct challenge to the Revolution's foundations. In response, women's legal and social advancements were met with repression, often rolling back changes made over years of lobbying and reform.

In the early 2000s, conservative forces arbitrarily shut down women's magazines and arrested influential activists within the reformist movement (Keddie 2006).⁹ Several female MPs were also summoned to the disciplinary committee for working with members of the Women's Caucus (Moghadam and Haghightjoo 2016). Legal barriers further obstructed many of the caucus's achievements. For example, while the Guardian Council approved revisions to the Family Protection Laws after their passage in parliament, it systematically introduced amendments that "emptied them of their progressive elements" (Akbarzadeh and Barlow 2008, 28). Similarly, after parliament passed a bill to ratify CEDAW, the Guardian Council later rejected it on the grounds

⁹ Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji were both arrested following their participation at reformist conference in Berlin after their critiques of the reformist movement being "slow" and facing pushback from conservative forces (Akbarzadeh and Barlow 2008).

that it was incompatible with Islam (Sameh 2019).¹⁰ Beyond outright vetoes of other bills, the Council – composed largely of conservative politicians loyal to the Supreme Leader – actively sabotaged many of the caucus’s hard-won victories.

Conservative Backlash and the Launch of the One Million Signatures Campaign (OMSC)

The Sixth Parliament was preceded by a highly conservative Seventh Parliament which emerged as a direct reaction to the perceived progressive elements of its predecessor, effectively dismantling all of the Women’s Caucus’s gains (Sameh 2019). Beyond reversing laws, conservatives also leveraged their positions in key government offices to suppress and silence reformist voices. The judiciary issued a death sentence to a notorious reformist history professor and followed that with the arrests of other Iranian intellectuals (Keddie 2006). Women protested the crackdown on International Women’s Day in 2003, but their efforts were swiftly suppressed (2006, 297). Frustration with the political rollback culminated in a widespread boycott of the 2004 parliamentary elections and the subsequent 2005 presidential election. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former conservative mayor, thus effectively won in a landslide, marking the effective closure of Iran’s briefly expanding public sphere which had given rise to the reformist movement in the first place (Akbarzadeh and Barlow 2008; Sadeghi 2010).

Thousands of women protested this effective loss of institutional access, organizing rallies and sit-ins to demand accountability for the crackdown and continued reform. Over 5,000 women staged a protest rally in front of Tehran University in 2005, protesting the conservative takeover of parliament and government suppression efforts (Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009). It was after

¹⁰ Akbarzadeh and Barlow note that this “incompatibility” was interesting given that the caucus had crafted this bill precisely in terms legible to the conservative camp. They presented CEDAW through an Islamic lens to ensure its compatibility, rather than opposition, with Sharia law (2008).

security forces broke up the rally that women called for an election boycott in response (2009). After Ahmadinejad's election victory, dozens of women organized another rally but, before it could even get underway, "the several hundred women who had arrived early were brutally attacked and injured" (2009, 221). In commemorating the Tehran University protests from a year earlier, women organized another round of protests in 2006 but were met with an even harsher government response. Security forces raided the protests and brutally assaulted several women (Akbarzadeh and Barlow 2008). Over seventy protesters were subsequently arrested and many others taken for questioning (2008).

On June 12, 2006, the same day as the broken-up protests, key members of the women's resistance front pivoted to a new strategy. As Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, one of the campaign's founding members, recalls, "At the gathering, a variety of groups representing a broad spectrum of ideas had come together to demand the reform of laws, especially family laws, that discriminate women" (2010, 5). After their brutal suppression of their demonstration, it became clear that the group's "tactics (had) to change with the circumstances" (2010, 54). In the weeks that followed, extensive discussions led to the launch of a new project: the "One Million Signatures Campaign" (OMSC) for change.

Modeled off a Moroccan women's rights campaign focused on bottom-up change, OMSC prioritized "face-to-face dialogue" and attempts to educate women on the "concrete problems and shared pains inflicted by unfair laws and a discriminatory legal system" (Khorasani 2010, 9, 47). Building off the efforts of the Women's Caucus, the campaign's members tackled gender discrimination on two fronts. The first was cultural. Women went door-to-door, initiated meetings, and held public seminars and conferences in raising awareness on gender discriminatory laws, building connections with other women around shared experiences. Once they had reached broad-

based support for legal change, the campaign would shift to a second phase – targeting and repealing laws deemed harmful to women’s lives (Sameh 2019). As Sameh notes, by leveraging both bottom-up sociocultural change and top-down legal reform, women sought to apply pressure on both sides, “harmon(izing) law with culture” (2019, 43). Given that they no longer had institutional access and deemed lobbying efforts in the face of a new conservative administration hostile to women’s demands largely irrelevant, the alternative was to shift the balance of power in favor of public opinion, in time forcing leaders to take action (Khorasani 2010).¹¹

The campaign officially launched on August 25, 2006, bringing together both “veteran activists” and a new generation eager to put their plans into action (Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009, 221). One of the most distinctive features of the campaign was its transnational network, with “chapters” spanning the US, Europe, and Asia (Sameh 2019). Activists forged connections with international women’s organizations and the Iranian diaspora while using digital technologies to accelerate signature collection – a luxury previous women’s rights campaigns had lacked. In total, the campaign targeted “forty-six articles embedded in Iran’s Civil Code, twenty-two in the Penal Code, and one Constitutional article used to ban women from seeking the office of the president” (2019, 37). These laws were viewed as major impediments to women’s rights in Iran and a good comprehensive first step to reform. Tackling them would both become a holistic attempt to expose the expansive nature of gender discrimination in the legal code and rally support around laws that uniquely contributed to women’s subjugation.

¹¹ Activists also largely relinquished efforts to make gender compatible with an Islamic framework. The “Islamic-rights” approach previously at the center of change efforts was no longer key to women’s discourse (Sadeghi 2010). Instead, activists emphasized human rights and equality which largely emerged as discursive focuses through conversations with women in the West (Sameh 2019).

Four months after OMSC's launch, an activist was arrested while collecting signatures on board the Tehran subway, becoming an early signal on the government's views of the campaign (Khorasani 2010, 157). Nearly a month later, two additional activists were similarly arrested while collecting signatures (2010, 157). In time, arrests became a normal feature of the campaign, increasing in severity as the months passed. By the end of 2007, over ninety activists had been arrested, many of them handed multi-year jail sentences on suspicions of "gathering and collusion with intent to threaten national security" (2010, 162). The same year, Iran's Minister of Information declared the campaign as "elements of soft subversion" against the state (2010, 160). In response, detainments sped up and often followed the gathering of signatures, awareness-raising efforts drawing attention to those arrested, and even extended to activists' homes where they were raided for material that could be used against them (2010, 155-169). Notable figures of the campaign, including Nasrin Sotoudeh, were prevented from leaving the country on several occasions, even to accept awards on OMSC's behalf (2010, 164, 167).

In comparing her activism in OMSC to that of the women's caucus, Shirin Ebadi noted that before 2005 (the same year Ahmadinejad was elected), attempts to align the state's Sharia framework with human rights were not seen as opposing the state itself. After the conservative takeover of government, however, any criticism of the regime was equated to subversion (Sameh 2019). This became even more apparent following the Green Movement where many OMSC activists found a home, merging efforts with broader reforms to the state. After six months of protests came to an end, many the OMSC activists who had joined forces with the movement were arrested (Sadeghi 2010). Others were prosecuted alongside their families and the campaign's website was officially blocked in deterring further activities (Khorasani 2010). The regime's

handling of OMSC exemplified its new façade as a “police state,” sending key activists, including Ebadi, into exile which severely weakened prospects for a women’s movement (Sameh 2019).

Iran’s “Twitter Revolution”: Protests, Technology, State Backlash and the Advent of a New Visual Culture

The 2009 presidential election marked a significant departure from past regime practices, with widespread allegations of voter fraud casting a shadow over the results. Incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sought a second term against two “reformist candidates” – Iran’s former Prime Minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and Shia cleric, Mehdi Karroubi – both of whom campaigned on promises to revive civil society and restore the political freedoms eroded under Ahmadinejad. Their platforms resonated strongly with young voters, particularly women who had played a key role in Khatami’s election years earlier. Adding to their appeal, both Karroubi and Mousavi’s wives were vocal advocates for women’s rights, often delivering impassioned speeches in front of large audiences – a sharp contrast to the Supreme Leader and conservative politicians whose wives were seldom involved in political life (Nabavi 2012).

Given their widespread popularity, it then came as a shock when Ahmadinejad was announced to have won a second term in a landslide victory. Mobilizing around Mousavi, who by then had taken the reformist ticket, people poured into the streets in demanding accountability for their votes. Clashes with security forces immediately ensued and, over time, many protesters were killed by government-backed militias at the order of conservatives, including Mousavi’s own nephew who was reportedly shot during a demonstration (*The Telegraph* 2009).

At its peak, the Green Movement – named for the color symbolizing the reformist faction and Mousavi’s campaign – drew over three million protesters in demonstrations that spanned

several months (Milani 2010). State forces, however, eventually quashed the uprising, signaling a decisive shift in Iranian politics toward even greater intolerance for dissent (Parsa 2020). Foreign media outlets were expelled, and domestic newspapers and media deemed “too open” were forcibly shut down. The few remaining NGOs that had survived previous crackdowns were also shuttered, with over 800 organizational leaders and activists arrested in the aftermath (Golkar 2022). As with many OMSC activists, hundreds of dissidents were driven into exile, marking the beginning of a mass exodus of opposition figures seeking to escape judicial persecution and imprisonment (Michaelsen 2018).

During the Green Movement, one factor became undeniably clear to political hardliners: the power of cell phones and new digital communication technologies for altering the dynamics of dissent. The Internet, cell phones, and social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook played a crucial role for capturing and disseminating evidence of government repression despite the state's media blackout (German 2014; Akhavan 2013, 83). Facebook emerged as a central tool for the opposition to connect with the Iranian public and generate momentum for their cause, well before the movement had even taken off (Rahimi 2011). Other technologies kept activists connected and shared news of backlash – skirting the barriers to government repression (Howard 2010; German 2014). In the following section, I trace the evolution of these technologies, showing how they became instruments of protest and, consequently, targets of government crackdowns. I also explore how, over time, the platforms that remained accessible took on a distinctly visual dimension – shaping a new visual culture towards the development of a new “repertoire of contention” later on (Tarrow and Tilly 2015).

The Evolution of Technology and Digital Communication Under the Islamic Republic

Alongside the opening of Iran under Khatami in the early 2000's, Iran underwent another significant change: the advent of the Internet and new cell phone technologies, bringing new forms of communication, engagement, and social and political expression to an otherwise closed context. Paralleling Khatami's political and social reforms, 418,000 people had gained access to the Internet by 2002 and that number was increasing steadily to reach 33,200,000 by 2010 (Johari 2002; Golkar 2011). Iran had one of the "highest internet user-growth rates in the world" (Golkar 2011, 53), second only to Israel in adopting the use of the Internet in the Middle East in 1993 (Rahimi 2003). Cell phones had also become a widely owned commodity, with around 75% of Iranians having one by 2009 (Giroux 2009). By the start of the Green Movement, cell phones were widely available across urban areas, and a popular source of sharing political satire and jokes using SMS technology (Howard 2010; Khazraee and Losey 2016).

Accounting for nearly 49% of total Internet users in Iran in 2003, many women found new forms of social and political engagement in this environment. Blogging, chatrooms and women's websites became popular outlets for free expression (Shirazi 2012). Chatrooms, for example, were places to meet, court, and date other young people, becoming a forged space for sexual transgressions impermissible in the physical public sphere (Mahdavi 2007). As one interviewee notes in Pardis Mahdavi's ethnographic account of cyberspace in Iran, "*by meeting the person online first, and getting to know him that way, we can be sure that taking the risk of a first date will actually be worth it,*" pushing against sexual norms in the virtual world while mitigating the risks of public encounters in the physical world (2007, 19). Websites such as "Meydane Zanan," "Feminist School," and "Change For Equality" further enabled discussions around women's topics while shaping feminist discourse, circumscribing the increasingly repressive Ahmadinejad years

to maintain gender discrimination at the forefront of public discussions (Abbasgholizadeh 2014; Nasirpour, Barlow, and Akbarzadeh 2022).¹²

Blogging was a particularly pervasive form of online engagement. Blogging was so popular that Iran had the fourth highest weblog user-rates in the world in the mid-2000's (Golkar 2011). Women bloggers comprised a significant portion of this population, with thousands of blogs dedicated to women's issues created since the first Farsi blog launched in 2001 (Shirazi 2012). In discussing taboo topics from sex and marriage to politics and culture, women shared opinions rarely discussed in open settings (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008b). For example, one blog focused on the life of a former prostitute, detailing experiences with former clients in providing insight into the world of the Iranian underground (Rahimi 2003). Other blogs focused on parenting and motherhood, discussing the advantages of "Western-style" parenting approaches outside of those advocated by the Islamic Republic (Gheytauchi 2015). Through what Amir-Ebrahimi calls a "velvet female transgression," women used these sites to criticize and challenge cultural and political norms that severely impacted their daily lives (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008b). Blogs became "a space where they [women] could drop their public mask... and reveal things that have never been permissible for a 'decent and good' girl to disclose in public" (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008a, 240).

Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, however, marked a turning point in such trends, rolling back many of women's newfound freedoms. Alongside the suppression of women's protests in 2005-6 which later gave rise to OMSC, the government took aim at online spaces as well. Blogs promoting so-called "Western feminist ideas" were shut down, access to certain websites were restricted, and even the word "woman" was filtered from the digital public sphere (Amir-Ebrahimi

¹² Seasoned members of the women's caucus and OMSC were behind the launch of these websites. In many ways, these websites supplemented the organizing efforts of OMSC and other campaigns by sharing news of women's arrests and government repression (Abbasgholizadeh 2014).

2008a). As state control over the Iranian blogosphere tightened, new social media platforms such as MySpace, Orkut, and Friendster began to replace blogs in popularity (Rahimi 2011). Rahimi highlights a key distinction between these platforms and the earlier Iranian Blogosphere, noting that: “the ability to get connected with people who share interests and ideas across ethnic, gender, political, and religious boundaries marked a sharp distinction from blogs, which mostly provided privatized spaces of expression where others could merely view, copy, and paste to other sites online” (2011, 7). Given this shift, it is no surprise that these emerging digital spaces soon became vital political tools in the lead-up to the Green Movement. This is why, as Akhavan notes, “if the blogosphere dominated the Iranian Internet in the early years of the new millennium, the end of its first decade belonged to social media” (2013, 83).

During Mousavi’s campaign, many of his young supporters turned to Facebook – a platform already popular for connecting with Iranian friends and family overseas – to share information and build support around his candidacy (Khazraee and Losey 2016). With limited access to traditional media, Facebook became a crucial tool for sustaining momentum around the reformist movement (Howard 2010). Its growing popularity was driven not only by increased government restrictions on other platforms but also by a strategy on the part of the regime to leverage these sites for access to information, which the opposition misread. In a calculated effort to create an illusion of openness, authorities temporarily unblocked Facebook in the months leading up to the 2009 election. This allowed for a short period of open engagement online, only to be once again shut down when protests erupted. After quashing the protests, leaders asserted their rule over these sites with a blanket ban while additionally using the information they had gained in the interim to identify and arrest activists (Morozov 2009; Rahimi 2011). This

undergirded the kind of relationship regime forces would have with these technologies for the next decade.

The Power of the Visual

On the day of the 2009 presidential election, SMS services suddenly stopped working (Khazraee and Losey 2016). Even once back up, there were drastic slowdowns in sending messages and accessing websites (2016). Against this backdrop, protesters turned to social media to document and share evidence of government repression, helping to popularize the term “citizen journalist” in the context of the uprising (German 2014; Akhavan 2013, 83). When uploads succeeded in bypassing state suppression attempts, videos showed massive crowds in the streets alongside a heavy military presence working to suppress demonstrations – offering a stark contrast to the biased coverage of state media. Pictures and videos were grainy yet became part of the image’s revolutionary self-made aesthetic (Mottahedeh 2015). These images “produced testimony,” laying claim to a counter-reality that protesters were witnessing – one that would likely be denied by the state in propelling its own official narrative (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014, 758).

Among these images was a live recording capturing the final moments of Neda Agha-Soltan’s life. Shot by a government sniper on her way to a protest, Neda became the defining symbol of the Green Movement after images of her bloodied face spread online and reappeared in demonstrations across Iran and the Iranian diaspora. Two short recordings showing her collapse, gasping for air as blood soon rushed out of her nose and spread across her face, were first shared on Facebook before being cross-shared on YouTube and Twitter (Rahimi 2011). Failed attempts to save her, as shown in the video, infused the emotionally charged clip with anger, visually representing the regime’s violent repression of peaceful protests. More than just a coincidentally

captured moment of tragedy, the image thus “memorialized a powerful narrative in the name of Neda,” encapsulating the growing sentiment that regime hardliners would stop at nothing in maintaining their grip on power (2011, 10).

The centrality of instantly produced images and digital communications platforms in the Iranian movement “ushered in a new regime of visual imagery” through which “mass and image-based media became (a) distinctly powerful pedagogical force... reconfiguring the very nature of politics, cultural production, engagement, and resistance” (Giroux 2009, 88). In other words, camera phones and social media had converged in a new civic media practice. *Camera phones*, carried as an extension of the self rather than solely for special events (as was the case with traditional cameras),¹³ allowed for the swift capture of (often mundane) scenes and activities. These images were then shared on *social media*, often through the same mobile devices, where digital engagement would shape their meaning by embedding them into already existing narratives of suffering and oppression – much like in Neda’s case (Olesen 2014).

After the regime successfully quashed the Green Movement, these technologies, and the introduction of new visually dominant platforms, further solidified the role of images in political practices. The launch of Instagram (2010, acquired by Facebook in 2012) and Telegram (2013) introduced new avenues for content sharing, particularly through their streamlined features for photo and video editing, as well as large-scale messaging groups (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). Notably, these platforms also did not face immediate censorship, allowing them to amass

¹³ Shireen Walton (2015) refers to this shift as the "fifth movement in photography," where the widespread availability of camera phones made taking pictures easier and more spontaneous. Whereas photography historically required costly cameras typically reserved for special occasions, this new movement allowed everyday moments to be captured and shared instantly, transforming visual culture.

large userships.¹⁴ Visuals, as a key architectural feature, shaped user engagement, drawing parallels to the influence of satellite television, which had demonstrated its own political potential in the 2000s. Independently owned mass media channels, broadcast by the Iranian diaspora and international networks, cultivated an alternative culture of media consumption, disrupting the state's monopoly on information (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011). These channels created a link between Iranians within and outside the country, frequently incorporating user-generated content directly sent to channels or picked up from YouTube and other social media platforms, in political discussions (2011).

Platforms such as Telegram incorporated similar features that enabled users to create independent “channels” with audiences ranging from thousands to millions, covering topics from health and leisure to political and social issues. One notable example was *Vahid Online*, a widely followed news-sharing channel that emerged shortly after Telegram's launch in Iran, to discuss state repression, social issues, and protests (when they emerged). The channel's administrator, known by the pseudonym “Vahid,” first gained prominence for documenting government crackdown in the Green Movement. A former member of Mousavi's campaign, Vahid recorded footage of security forces raiding and attacking the campaign's headquarters before fleeing Iran (Rahimi 2016). Such experiences with visual documentation later motivated the establishment of the *Vahid Online* platform for centralizing the reception and dissemination of user-generated content from Iran – today remaining one of the most influential news channels on the Farsi web.

¹⁴ Until Woman, Life, Freedom in 2022, Instagram was one of the few openly accessible media platforms in Iran. Due to end-to-end encryption features and platform owners' refusal to work with the Iranian government in giving access to user data, Telegram was also a hugely popular messaging platform, making up twenty-five percent of the application's entire user base (Etehad 2017).

Other Telegram channels “picking up” on the feminist consciousness raising efforts of the campaigns, women’s NGOs, and magazines from the 2010’s also emerged during this time. “Women’s Watch” and “Feminism Everyday,” launched as Telegram channels in 2015 and 2016 respectively, forming spaces for women to connect and share information around images of worldwide demonstrations, art exhibitions, and interviews with feminist-minded activists, artists, and creators. These platforms not only served to connect disparate women’s coalitions that were forced underground, but also played an important role in connecting women in Iran to their counterparts abroad (Batmanghelichi and Mouri 2017).

Throughout the 2010s, Instagram rapidly grew in popularity as the only widely accessible platform among the “big four” social media sites – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube – expanding upon photo-sharing practices already common to Iranian photoblogs. Photoblogs served as a crucial precursor to Instagram, functioning as a “third space” for visual expression through bottom-up media practices rejecting both the Iranian state’s monopolization of visual culture – manipulated through national broadcasting, art, museums, murals, and other state-controlled visual mediums – and Western portrayals of Iran through an Orientalist lens (Walton 2015; 2016). Instead, Iranian photobloggers reimagined everyday life through mundane expressions that constructed alternative cultural and political narratives (2016). In one poignant example from Walton’s account of such contrasting visual cultures, Iranian social media users took pictures of themselves in jeans in response to a comment by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Iranians lack even the most basic freedoms such as the right to “wear jeans” and “listen to Western music” (Walton 2016; *BBC News* 2013). Hundreds of photos shared on Twitter – and subsequently re-shared on photoblogs – showed ordinary people wearing jeans which pushed back at such comments, making “ordinariness” a political act of self-expression.

Instagram expanded upon these visual practices, becoming enmeshed into various aspects of social, political, and economic life to foster the creation of an alternative visual culture. By 2021, the platform accounted for nearly 82% of all social media traffic in Iran (*Reporters Without Borders* 2022). Offering an unfiltered glimpse into the lives of celebrities and the country's elite, Instagram first gained popularity as a space for sharing trivial pictures of lavish parties, luxury cars, and opulent mansions which stood in stark contrast to the everyday struggles of ordinary Iranians navigating economic precarity (Partain 2020). However, beyond such superficial glimpses into the lifestyles of the rich and famous, Instagram also evolved around new forms of economic engagement, giving rise to a new generation of influencers and digital entrepreneurs who relied on the application's capacities for visual marketing to promote products and services. By 2021, an estimated 80% of online purchases in Iran were made through applications such as Instagram (Dagres 2022). Young users gained influencer status through gaming, food blogging, and lifestyle content – practices already common in the West – to carve out a space in Iran's new digital economy (2022).

A defining feature of this emerging visual culture was the expression and performance of alternative identities, particularly among those whose public self-expression was restricted by the Iranian state (Hooman 2022). Ebrahimi and Salaverría (2015) show how Iranian women, for example, used highly curated images of themselves unveiled and adorned with heavy makeup to construct versions of themselves outside the dominant framework of the Islamic Republic. Notably, they show how as many as 70% of women posting such images did so under pseudonyms or private accounts, creating a protective barrier that allowed for protections from state backlash (2015). Similarly, female bodybuilders leveraged Instagram to challenge dominant narratives around femininity and the ideal female body (Rahbari 2019). Rejecting bodybuilding as an

exclusively masculine pursuit – especially in Iran where wrestling is the national sport – became a way to disrupt gender norms and assert ownership over women’s physical bodies 2019.

One example of such emerging digital cultures, especially prominent among young social media users, came in 2014 when a group of young men and women recorded themselves singing and dancing to Pharrell Williams’s song *Happy*. The video, part of a global trend in which people around the world created their own renditions of the song, captured a moment of lighthearted joy in the lives of Iranian youth, dancing on the back porches and empty streets of Iran where the video was filmed. Within 48 hours, the video amassed over 300,000 views, making it viral (Gander 2014). However, unlike similar videos elsewhere, this display of youthful joy drew the attention of Iranian authorities who swiftly identified and arrested the individuals involved on claims of “hurting public chastity” (*BBC News* 2014).

The *Happy* arrests marked a turning point in the state’s approach to such visual countercultures, shifting away from what seemed like a reluctant tolerance in the past to proactive suppression in 2014. While authorities curiously kept platforms like Instagram open – leading some to assume this gesture was a strategic form of repression allowing the regime to monitor dissent while disseminating its own propaganda (Khazraee and Losey 2016; Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019) – crackdowns on digital defiance also ensued. For example, several high-profile Iranian Instagram users became subject to harassment, shutdowns, and arrests (Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019). Government response was often unpredictable, selectively targeting some users while leaving others untouched, thereby creating an air of uncertainty around who was crossing the figurative red line. Between 2017 and 2021, over 332 individuals were detained for social media-related offenses, with Instagram accounting for nearly a third of these arrests (Dagres 2022). In an effort to counteract the influence of foreign platforms, the government also introduced

state-controlled alternative versions within Iran’s “Halal web” (*Reporters Without Borders* 2016). These included digital replicas of platforms such as Instagram, where authorities would at times even clone the profiles of well-known Instagram users without their knowledge to the sites in attempts to drive user migration (Miresmaeili 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter traced the evolving patterns and repertoires of women’s resistance across a shifting social and political terrain, laying the foundation for the emergence of visual protest movements such as My Stealthy Freedom (MSF), the subject of the following chapter. The 1979 Revolution entrenched gender within the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary ideology, turning it into a key site of political and social control. Women had to work within the confines of this framework to push for their interests creatively – challenging gender discriminatory laws and practices both covertly, through tools like religious reinterpretation enabled by expanded educational access, and overtly, through coalition-building and lobbying for legal reform.

Given the regime’s reliance on gender as a pillar of ideological control, even modest challenges to its gendered framework provoked intense anxiety among hardline elements, framed as external, Western attempts to uproot the system. Leaders thus responded aggressively to perceived threats to the political order – particularly those challenging the legal codification of gender norms – with violence, arrests, surveillance, and the systematic silencing of activists, ultimately pushing much of Iran’s women’s movement into exile. Around the new reality of displacement for many activists forced to flee Iran in the face of repression – and the advent of social media and digital technologies keeping them connected despite their varying locations –

emerged a new form of digital visual activism confronting gender discriminatory practices from below.

This form of activism relied heavily on newfound forms of communication and connection enabled by social media and the widespread availability of camera phones – both of which coincided with shifts in Iran’s political landscape, making it more intolerant of feminist challenges. Alternative forms of self-expression and engagement enabled by these technologies gradually coalesced towards the construction of new identities beyond those dictated by the state. However, as had been the case with earlier women’s defiance of the regime’s gender code, the state adapted its strategies of repression to the digital landscape. By 2014 when a nascent visual counterculture was emerging around consumerism, leisure, and self-expression, the regime had already begun extending its mechanisms of control into digital space: enhancing online surveillance, targeting dissenters with arrests, and producing counter-narratives through propaganda circulated online. MSF emerged at the very intersection of these new forms of defiance and state attempts to reassert dominance over this new digital terrain.

MSF built upon these everyday cultural practices by cultivating a space for the construction of new identities and gendered expressive practices. However, its real challenge came from the ways women turned these alternative expressions into protest over time, gradually shifting them from online to offline spaces in disrupting the state’s spatial regime. These acts were facilitated by the changes of the preceding decades, leading women to push the bounds on creative resistance in much the same ways they had in their previous challenges to the regime. But this time, they coupled that creativity with new forms of embodied protest, decentralized expression, and visual resistance, taking apart various elements of the Islamic Republic’s gender regime which – as the following chapter lays out – presented it with a tentacular movement more difficult to suppress.

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CHAPTER 4: FROM 'STEALTHY' FREEDOM TO OPEN DEFIANCE: PROMOTING PUBLIC TAKEOVER IN *MY STEALTHY FREEDOM*

Introduction

In May 2014, a self-exiled former Iranian journalist named Masih Alinejad uploaded a picture of herself to her personal Facebook page, showing her running joyfully towards the camera in a tree-filled street in London, where she resided at the time.¹⁵ Her hair appeared to stand still as it lifted above her, her arms spanned outwards, and her face donned a smile – around which she captioned the image: “when I run and feel the wind in my hair, I am reminded that I come from a country which kept my hair hostage for thirty years,” (Mohseni 2015).

A former parliamentary journalist having fled Iran in the mass exodus of dissidents following the Green Movement, Alinejad had a large following on Facebook. As a result, her post received several comments from women in Iran, expressing that they too longed for the same freedoms Alinejad enjoyed in the West. As Alinejad has since shared in various interviews, this inspired her to post a second image of herself driving in Iran without a headscarf in demonstrating the “stealthy freedoms” that she, and other Iranian women, take part in when no one is watching.¹⁶ Mirroring Alinejad’s photo, dozens of women shared similar pictures of themselves in the comments section of the post, inspiring Alinejad to launch the “My Stealthy Freedom” (MSF) Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/>) the following day.

¹⁵ I could not verify the exact date the photo was posted as it appears it has since been deleted.

¹⁶ Like the first photo, I could not find the subsequent post, relying instead on Alinejad’s narration of the launch of My Stealthy Freedom from her autobiography and various interviews.

What soon turned into a multi-year social-media-based women's movement spanning Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and a website,¹⁷ MSF launched on May 3, 2014, with a picture of a woman standing unveiled on a desolate road (see Figure 1). Expressing longing and finality, in the same way a prisoner might feel after being released, the picture shows the woman's face lifted towards the sky with her arms held out in a T shape beside her, sharing in the accompanying caption included by Alinejad that, *"feeling the gust of the wind in my hair in that moment was one of the best feelings I had ever felt. I had traveled abroad before, but the feeling of freedom I had in that forest in Shomal, in my own forbidden country, was completely different"* (StealthyFreedom 5/3/14). Similar pictures of women unveiled throughout public locations in Iran, and sharing similar sentiments, were shared over the following days and weeks. By the end of the first week, the MSF Facebook page had shared over 150 pictures and garnered 130,000 likes, signaling early popularity both with women in Iran and audiences abroad (BBC News 2014).

¹⁷ As the MSF Facebook page grew, Alinejad hired a team of administrators to help manage it alongside her personal Instagram page where she often cross-shared, or exclusively shared, images sent to her. Alinejad also has a Twitter page which she frequently updates with MSF content and a website dedicated exclusively to MSF, which she launched on May 3, 2015, in celebration of the campaign's one year anniversary.



Figure 1: MSF's first post: a woman standing unveiled in a desolate road (StealthyFreedom 5/3/14).

These images showed women appearing silly, joyful, and carefree, similar to the sentiments expressed in Alinejad's picture in London. Some showed women smiling, jumping, or fanning out their arms as they appeared in public without the veil. In one picture, a woman jokingly picks the nose of a male figure in a movie poster as she glances back at the camera and smiles with her headscarf thrown over her shoulder (StealthyFreedom 5/3/14). In another, a woman sticks her tongue out as she runs her hand through her hair along a hiking path (StealthyFreedom 5/6/14). Strikingly similar in tone to the *Happy* video, where a group of young Iranian men and women sang and danced together in their rendition of the Pharrell Williams hit song, images from the first few weeks and months of MSF demonstrated freedom and subversion through joy and playfulness.

By 2022, however, MSF pictures and videos struck an altogether different tone. Contrasting the images above to a video shared on the MSF page from July 2022 – only a few months before the start of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement – clear differences emerge in how women

expressed agency in the face of compulsory hijab laws. As illustrated in the video still in Figure 2, a woman stands in front of several headscarves she has placed on the ground, observing passersby who take it as a signal to stomp or walk on top of them. A second woman records and narrates the scene, noting that her daughter has placed the headscarves on the ground as a “*symbolic protest to compulsory hijab*” in support of “*the brave women (of Iran)*.”

Eight years into MSF, images show women engaged in direct – rather than covert – acts of defiance. “Protest,” “civil disobedience,” and “fearlessness” more frequently adorn this later content and reflect a shift in both tone and tactics. Rather than mere gestures of private resistance, these images capture an open, collective resistance to Iran’s state-imposed dress code and gender discriminatory laws. They underscore a growing boldness in women’s protests in overtaking public space, as well as a broader societal willingness to challenge compulsory hijab out in the open.



Figure 2: A video still showing a woman waiting for passersby to walk over the headscarves she has placed on the ground in a symbolic act of protest to compulsory hijab (StealthyFreedom 7/12/22).

This chapter examines such differences and this evolution by showing how the affordances of visibility, hybrid presence, diffusion, and alternative-world making shaped the MSF movement

in unanticipated ways. I argue that MSF slowly escalated its challenge to gender laws by taking *to* and *over* the public sphere. What began as the sharing of private experiences of resistance and repression gradually evolved into overt practices of defiance – normalizing women’s defiant appearances, actions, and rhetoric while forging new public relationships around them. In other words, images shifted from documenting what women *had* done and *experienced* in secret, to what they *were actively doing* and *experiencing* in real-time.

As my analysis of MSF images and captions reveals, this transformation was driven by a process of collective learning whereby women shared new discourses and tactics among one another without being in the same place or moment in time, over time upping the ante on their rebellions in a decentralized way. State responses further influenced these dynamics by triggering new strategies on the part of women, gradually increasing the pace of experience and reaction. Over the course of the movement’s eight most active years, images played a critical role in bringing visibility to previously hidden acts of defiance while simultaneously enabling new practices aimed at normalizing women’s actions. These practices allowed women to engage in a safer form of protest – one that granted them a relative degree of safety from backlash – while reversing the gaze of surveillance to instead bring attention to state-backed gender discrimination and violence.

Making Visible the Invisible: Women’s “Stealthy” Freedoms and Experiences

In the first few weeks and months of MSF, posts often described women’s feelings of freedom when removing their headscarves in desolate spaces and locations. In fact, many of MSF’s early pictures were not taken directly for the page but rather shared as a way of demonstrating moments of freedom from the mandatory hijab and other gender-banned activities in places women knew were less frequented by authorities. For example, in a picture showing the silhouette of

several women jumping on a hill for a picture with their scarves visibly on their shoulders, the timestamp of the photo shows that it was taken nearly four years earlier (StealthyFreedom 8/23/14). The caption makes note of this timelapse as the sender shares that the photo is from a time when her and her friends *“traveled to a faraway place in order to be able to experience freedom.”* Similarly, in another photo of an unveiled woman jumping in a forest with her arms lifted in the air and a smile on her face, she includes in the accompanying caption that *“for having moments of freedom and joy,”* she must *“travel for hours outside of Tehran to the far-away corner of a forest to seek refuge so that they (authorities) don’t take away even this mere stealthy freedom”* (StealthyFreedom 8/14/14). Such captions spoke directly to the “stealthy freedoms” from Alinejad’s original post while adapting them to a different context – that of desolate natural locations.

Throughout MSF, “nature” pictures – images of women undertaking illegal acts in natural environments – appear more than any other setting. Comprising 794 pictures and videos in total, they far outnumber pictures from urban landscapes. Beaches, mountains, forests, and parks are just some of the places that women chose to make the background of their photos. Images from remote villages, the countryside and even along highways were also common to MSF.

As suggested by the captions above, such settings played a key role in women’s lives before the movement by offering a respite from compulsory hijab and other laws. In these sites, it is more common to see “bad hejabis” who lightly don the headscarf, wear it across their shoulders, or “veil” using a hat.¹⁸ As a child in Iran, I remember hiking with my family in the nearby mountains

¹⁸ “Bad hejabi” is a term that gained popularity in the 1990’s to describe women’s laxer use of the veil, coinciding with the turn to reformist politics in Iran under President Rafsanjani. Asef Bayat relates this to a turn towards “post-Islamic” values in Iran, by which Islam showed itself insufficient as a guiding revolutionary principal (1996). For further details on the historical emergence of this phenomenon and state responses to bad hejabis, see: Ramazani,

and seeing women swapping their headscarves for hats or letting their veils slip loose until they eventually rested on their shoulders. Parks and recreational sites additionally have a long history in Iranian culture as leisurely spaces for enjoyment and fun (Yazdani 2015). Along with cinemas, malls, and the “streets,” they comprise a category of space outside the traditional domain of the family and tightly-surveilled neighborhoods and strictly controlled government offices, hospitals, and other institutions which might explain the prevalence of such sites across MSF, especially in early posts (Amir-Ebrahimi 2006).

Women thus publicized acts from the places they were already accustomed to breaking gender laws, with parks and natural sites being a focal point of many images. For example, in a post showing a woman walking along a shoreline as she lifts her veil in the air, she mentions having walked “*countless times without the compulsory hijab on the shoreline,*” but that this time “*taking a picture for this page... and movement... (felt) different*” (StealthyFreedom 9/3/14). Another woman begins her post with “*All of the roads in Iran carry the secrets of Iranian women and girls,*” as a reference to women’s frequent use of such desolate places for exercising agency around public morality laws (StealthyFreedom, 4/6/15).

These posts speak to a broader pattern of forging “private” spaces within the broadly controlled public spaces under the state’s control. Where authorities, the morality police, and those harassing women in forcing compliance to the law are not present, women use these locations to engage in “*just a brief moment of resistance*” (StealthyFreedom, 9/12/14). One woman, for example, mentions that she always “*ditches the hijab*” whenever she believes “*the eyes of the police are far away*” (StealthyFreedom 7/22/15). In a poem accompanying her post, another

Nesta. 1993. “Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow.” *Middle East Journal* 47 (3): 409–28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328602>.

woman writes, *“we have tasted the sweetest moments in the homes of our friends, we have stolen kisses in the faraway corners of our land where the hands (of the police) cannot reach us,”* referring to the carved-out spaces for engaging in such stealthy freedoms (StealthyFreedom 4/7/16).

By contrasting busy public spaces – where women are required to wear the hijab – with desolate areas where they can more freely remove it, posts engage a stark divide between restriction and liberation. Many of these comparisons emphasize how women feel stripped of the right to “be themselves,” using natural elements in their surroundings to visually express the sense of freedom they are denied when forced to veil. For example, pictures from beaches and shorelines are one of the most prominent spatial categories within MSF’s “nature” images, with 258 photos and videos dedicated to this setting alone. Women often play with the natural elements of this landscape to convey the feelings of being restricted by the veil, capturing their hair flowing in the wind or basking in the warmth of the sun on their skin in showing the sensations they are deprived of with forced veiling (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: A woman lifts her face towards the sky as she is unveiled in a desolate beach setting in Iran. (StealthyFreedom 12/24/2014).

Posts also often note women’s feelings of inauthenticity when being forced to wear the veil – posing without it as a way to “feel themselves.” In another beach picture, a woman jumping on the shore with her hair lifted above her writes, “*whenever I want to take a picture, if the opportunity is there, I take off my veil. I feel like I am pretending with the hijab, like I am not myself*” (StealthyFreedom, 5/7/15). Another woman writes, “*Being yourself is not just a simple pleasure. The thought of having to be someone else every morning, to wear someone’s clothes as you leave the house, is hard for many people*” (StealthyFreedom 11/18/14). Placing pictures of women with the hijab against those showing them unveiled was thus common for capturing such feelings of inauthenticity across MSF. In a side-by-side comparison of her with the hijab for her Iranian passport picture and without the hijab for a “foreign document,” another woman captures this juxtaposition by stating: “*the one on the left is me; the one on the right is who they want me to be*” (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Putting two pictures of her side-by-side, a woman shares the image of herself she believes best represents her (left) with that which the regime had enforced upon her (right) (StealthyFreedom 2/5/15).

In other posts, women accompany their visualization of forged freedoms with long narratives shared in the caption, detailing their experiences with public discrimination and violence around the enforcement of morality laws. Sharing these experiences works to deepen the understanding of what is being achieved with a “stealthy” freedom while visibilizing women’s everyday experiences with gender laws. For example, in one post, a woman details her experience with the morality police when she was just twelve years old. Juxtaposing an image of herself veiled against that showing her shoulder-length hair, she recounts a time when the morality police stopped her for colorful pants that were too revealing under her manteau (StealthyFreedom 6/5/15). She recalls her “mother’s screams” as several “chador-clad women threw (her) in a van,” making viscerally clear women’s common experiences with the violent practices undergirding the enforcement of “morality.” In another example, a young student recounts her arrest for wearing a tightly wrapped manteau – an incident triggered not by her clothing itself, but by a sudden rainstorm that soaked the fabric, momentarily revealing the contours of her body (StealthyFreedom

6/30/14). Pointing out the absurdity of the situation, she remarks that she was essentially “*arrested for the rain.*” When her manteau eventually dries at the station, she goes on to note how the officer assigned to photograph her for police records appeared visibly perplexed, questioning whether she had been made to change after arriving, unable to comprehend that her so-called violation had been nothing more than her standard school uniform.

Other posts discuss women’s common experiences with discrimination and harassment even when veiled and abiding by the regime’s dress code. One woman mentions constantly living in a state of fear when leaving her house since “*men (here) see all woman as prostitutes,*” referring to frequent experiences of sexual harassment that women face in public, especially when exercising flexibility in veiling (StealthyFreedom 10/27/14). After detailing a list of preoccupations from getting robbed or attacked with acid to getting her satellite dish confiscated, she ends the post with “*why do I exist as a woman in this country?*” in speaking to gender-specific hardships. Discussing her religious upbringing and having to endure laws she does not agree with, another woman mentions the difficulties in having to self-censor just to “*maintain family honor*” (StealthyFreedom 6/26/15). Posting a picture of herself unveiled in front of a mosque, she writes that, after thirty years of “*being quiet, being respectful, and watching how to dress and act,*” she just wants to be herself (6/26/15).

Women in these posts use MSF as a platform for sharing their memories and revealing their innermost feelings about a law inconsistent with their desires and beliefs. In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen (1999) explores the tension between practice and belief in discussing the actualized experiences of domination that are apparent in how people partake in actions they do not support ideologically. In other words, a person may internally reject a practice, but their forced participation in it – regardless of their beliefs – is what ultimately sustains its power. In

MSF, however, posts such as those included above, demonstrate how women subvert public authority by sharing photos and personal accounts of defiance against state-imposed control. In one such example, a woman posts an old sepia-toned photograph of herself standing in front of several buildings, explaining that the image dates back to 1980 (see Figure 5). Revealing that, for years after the hijab became mandatory, she dressed as a boy to navigate public spaces without wearing it and even took on a male name (StealthyFreedom 5/22/15), she now shares the image as testament to her resistance.



Figure 5: A woman shares a picture of herself on the MSF Facebook page from the 1980's when she used to wear "men's clothes," cut her hair, and "even take on a male name" just "to go out without the headscarf" (StealthyFreedom 5/22/15).

These visual strategies serve to express the emotions women are denied in the broader public sphere under restrictive morality laws. To reclaim a sense of self and freely engage in bodily expression, they thus create "private" spaces – i.e. desolate areas where they are less likely to be watched or policed, or alternative male identities altogether – allowing them to momentarily

experience the freedom otherwise withheld from them. Using digitally circulated photos, women transform private, hidden experiences into public acts of resistance, making visible what was once concealed. Publicization exposes women's agency and highlights inconsistencies in the regime's control over women's bodies and public space, given that the state is not able to suppress all acts of individual agency at all times.

Freedom as Exercises in Personal Choice and Joy

In many of these posts, women articulate their deprivation as a denial of the right to choice, reclaiming this right through images of themselves smiling, tossing their hair, and joyfully jumping or dancing for the camera. The word “*choice*” (انتخاب) appeared 541 times in MSF captions between 2014 and 2022, underscoring its central role in shaping the movement's rhetorical framing around women's grievances and protest actions. Just three weeks into MSF, posts emphasized that “*the right to choose the hijab is the foundation for all other freedoms*” or frequently mentioned “*freedom of choice,*” highlighting the movement's early and persistent focus on bodily autonomy as a fundamental right (StealthyFreedom 5/24/14).

In contrast to force and violence, these posts emphasized acceptance, personal expression, and coexistence as the core values of unveiling. For instance, in a post from a few months later, a woman illustrates the right to choice through a photo of her sister standing beside her two young daughters, one veiled and the other unveiled (Figure 6). She reflects on how, just as her daughters hold different views on wearing the hijab, she and her sister do as well. While her sister chooses not to wear it, she herself embraces the hijab as the right choice for her – one she has never felt pressured into by others (StealthyFreedom 11/8/14). Through this example, she underscores that true freedom lies not in imposing a singular standard, but in respecting individual choice.



Figure 6: A woman stands next to her daughters, one veiled and the other unveiled, in demonstrating freedom of choice around public dress. Against acid attacks which appeared frequently around this time, the wall is graffitied with the word “acid” crossed out and the phrase “Rosewater to the face of the women of my country” (StealthyFreedom 11/8/14).

In early posts, the emphasis on choice is typically framed through a rhetorical strategy drawing on comparisons between veiled and unveiled women, as seen in the post above. These posts juxtapose pictures of women donning the veil as an act of personal choice against women showing their hair, demonstrating how differing views on public presentation can coexist. In one video, a woman states, *“Saying no to compulsory hijab doesn’t mean we want to be naked... it means we want freedom of choice.”* She reinforces this point by reflecting on her religious upbringing where family members held different views on the hijab. Despite tensions with her devout father, she asserts that people must have the right to decide for themselves *“whether wearing the hijab or not wearing the hijab is better for them”* (StealthyFreedom 12/20/17). A similar message appears in another video from the #WalkingUnveiled campaign, which I will discuss further below. In this footage, the person filming captures a veiled and an unveiled woman

walking side by side, noting that they have remained close friends for years despite their differing views on hijab. She urges viewers to “*respect each other’s opinions,*” framing the hijab as a matter of choice rather than a symbol of morality or sexual modesty (StealthyFreedom 11/12/18).

Alongside the emphasis on choice, women frequently ascribe feelings of *joy* to acts of unveiling. In photos and videos of women hiking or engaging in leisurely activities, they describe the “*great pleasure*” (“*خيلى لذت داره*”) of “*walking stealthily without the headscarf*” or “*not rushing to put the scarf back on*” after it slips, relishing the sensation of the wind and sun on their hair for just a little longer (StealthyFreedom 8/29/14; 6/22/14). In one post describing a moment her and her friends engaged in hidden joy, a young woman writes, “*We left stealthily and went to the top of the city stealthily; We laughed stealthily and danced stealthily and took pictures stealthily,*” instilling women’s actions with adventure, happiness, and exhilaration (StealthyFreedom 9/29/14). Others dream of moving beyond these “stealthy acts” to practice them openly, longing for a day when such moments are no longer fleeting, but a reflection of “*true freedom*” (7/13/14).

Joy has been a central theme in decolonial feminist scholarship, particularly in efforts to reclaim emotions that have been instrumentalized within modern colonial gender systems (Lugones 2010). Within this framework, the act of practicing joy itself becomes a form of resistance – one that challenges the imposed passivity of “woman” as a gendered category under patriarchal structures. In LatinX communities in the US, for example, joyful acts are forms of political resistance against the colonial and imperial legacies that have shaped Latino personhood (Soares 2023). Acts of joy disrupt narratives of “docility” as the expected mode of political subjectivity, instead re-disciplining the body “to model new power relations” (2023, 5-6). This closely links body and affect in a mutually reinforcing relationship of domination while situating resistance at the helm of this intersection.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores this co-construction of body and affect, making feminist practices acts of reclaiming both. She reflects, “*When I think of my relationship to feminism, for example, I can rewrite my coming into being as a feminist subject in terms of different emotions, or in terms of how my emotions have involved particular readings of the worlds I have inhabited*” (Ahmed 2014, 171). Since affect plays a key role in the subjectification and control of the female body, its liberation requires more than just physical autonomy; It demands an emotional and bodily reorientation toward social norms (2014).

This dynamic is reflected in Iranian women’s visual unveiling practices, where the emotional dimensions of the act are inseparable from its illegality. By making public what were once stealthy expressions of agency over their identities, women also expose the emotions tied to these acts – emotions that have long been suppressed. Joy itself becomes an act of rebellion, directly challenging the regime’s insistence that pleasure and happiness belong to the private sphere while women’s modesty serves as a safeguard against moral deviation.¹⁹

A caption from one MSF post, featuring a woman swinging in a playground without her hijab, illustrates this contrast. Longing to express publicly the joy she feels inside a women’s-only park, the sender writes:

“(Inside the women’s-only park) no one is forced to wear the veil.
Wow, if you could only see it! It’s heaven on earth! People there
laugh and are so happy. They enjoy the sun and the open air and, for

¹⁹ Religious practices in Iran, particularly those promoted by the state, hold a distinct character compared to many other Middle Eastern countries, shaped by the centrality of martyrdom, revolution, and resistance to the West. These practices are often public and deeply emotive, emphasizing piety, stoicism, and sorrow as defining traits of a devout believer and loyal supporter of the regime. Sadness is thus a state-backed public discourse and the trait of an ideal citizen in Iran. For a discussion on this distinct socio-religious practice, see: Delvecchio Good, Mary-Jo, and Byron J. Good. 1988. “Ritual, the State, and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society.” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 12 (1): 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00047038>. For details on how religious practices emphasizing sorrow differ from neighboring Middle Eastern countries where joy embeds Sunnism practices (for example, regarding the celebration of public holidays and displays of religious devotion), see: Bayat, Asef. 1998. “Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40 (1): 136–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179392>.

a few hours, forget about the outside world. I always think to myself, *what would happen if they always allowed us to be joyful?*” (StealthyFreedom 6/28/14, emphasis added).

“To always be joyful” reflects the reality that public expressions of happiness are often restricted or outright banned in Iran, especially for women. Given such limitations on bodily expression, publicly shared pictures of joy transcend such views to challenge imposed gender norms. Women make visible not only the forbidden act but connect it to an emotion which is similarly suppressed as a result, engaging body and affect in an act of rebellion to gender norms. Capturing this sentiment is a video shared with MSF, in which a man confronts a police officer for harassing a group of young boys and girls for dancing. The sender’s caption reads, *“Every day in Iran, there is a culture war between the government and young people. There are two different lifestyles: one for those who want to dance, listen to music, and watch volleyball, and another for those who seek to control this society and its joyful people”* (StealthyFreedom 11/27/14).

In a total of 555 pictures and videos, women express “joy” through various public activities including singing, dancing, biking, hugging, and kissing, often smiling when their faces are visible or raising their hands in the air when facing away from the camera. Much like the images of women on a beach, these photos incorporate natural elements to emphasize a sense of joy and freedom. Women may be seen running or jumping, their hair flowing in the wind, visually reinforcing the exhilaration of the moment. Driving while unveiled is another common motif, with women smiling as their headscarves are tossed over their shoulders, taking selfies with friends, or leaning out of car windows to feel the rush of air (Figure 7).



Figure 7: A woman lifts her arms while holding her headscarf in one hand as she stands through a car sunroof, smiling and appearing joyful (StealthyFreedom 11/19/14).

Two themes often emerge around “joy” in this content. Kissing is seen across many pictures and videos – one which Alinejad organizes under the hashtag #KissingIsNotACrime (#بوسیدن_جرم_نیست). Across numerous photos and videos, men and women share kisses in homes, parks, and street corners, directly challenging laws that restrict public male-female interactions to non-sensual acts. Some images depict couples kissing on the lips, while others showcase moments of familial affection – i.e. fathers kissing daughters, sons kissing mothers – disputing the assumption that all public displays of affection are inherently immoral or sexually provocative.

The captions accompanying these images often contrast the criminalization of harmless expressions of love with the state’s tolerance of corruption, executions, and the funding of senseless wars in Syria and across other countries in the Middle East. One post, featuring a couple sharing a kiss in a secluded park corner, reads: “*I am from a country where kissing in the street is*

forbidden, whereas public executions in the streets are allowed” (StealthyFreedom 12/25/16). The sender goes on to describe how she and her partner often face judgment and disapproving looks when kissing in public but remain undeterred, vowing to continue until society “*gets used to seeing love, not violence*” (12/25/16).

The other recurring theme draws on children, as women reflect on or depict the joy stolen from young girls who are forced to wear the hijab as early as age seven. In many posts, mothers express “*pity*” for their daughters who must “*wear the hijab at school*” (StealthyFreedom 9/21/14), often juxtaposing images of carefree, laughing children with solemn, veiled girls whose hair and bodies are covered. One woman, for example, shares how her daughter is a champion swimmer with dreams of becoming a singer. She and her husband wholeheartedly support her happiness, yet she laments asking, “*But in Iran, is there any path for her prosperity?*” (StealthyFreedom 2/13/15).

Just as images of men and women kissing challenge the government's framing of public affection as inherently sexual, these images push back against the regime's confinement of women's societal roles to reproduction and household duties. They highlight the joy and boundless aspirations taken from girls, once again centering women's freedom of choice around joy and happiness. Women in these posts label such restrictions a “*crime*” – one that robs girls of the simple experience of “*feeling the sun's rays on their hair*” (StealthyFreedom 8/27/15). Capturing such sentiments is an image a woman shares of herself and her cousin, both with and without the hijab as young girls. She recalls her mother's painful reaction to her first day of school: “*My mother later told me that everything got harder after kindergarten. My first day of school was hell for her. She explained how she held back tears as she placed the maghnaeh (the one-piece head*

and neck covering required in all Iranian schools) on my head and walked me to class. The entire way home, she cried” (see figure 8).



Figure 8: Side-by-side images of two young girls veiled and unveiled, sent by one of the image’s subjects when she was a young girl. The picture on the left shows the two girls playing happily without the constraint of the mandatory hijab while the picture on the right shows them veiled with banners reading “Death to America,” in celebration of the Islamic Revolution, donned across their shoulders (StealthyFreedom 2/24/2015).

From Sharing Experiences to Promoting Experiences

By 2015, the MSF Facebook had amassed over 600,000 followers and was frequently updated with new images of women detailing their stealthy freedoms or past experiences with gender discrimination. Over time, however, the images began to coalesce around specific themes and issues related to gender oppression, both narrowing the scope of women’s visual activism and sparking new forms of protest. Alinejad often used her position as the page’s administrator to create and add hashtags to the posts she received, especially when they appeared as a response to prevailing issues.²⁰ In addition to the *My Stealthy Freedom* watermark and hashtag accompanying

²⁰ As the MSF Facebook page grew, Alinejad hired a team of administrators to help manage it alongside her personal Instagram page where she often cross-shared, or exclusively shared, images sent to her. There is little

women's posts, new hashtags tied to offline events helped structure visual responses, inspiring future actions on the part of other women as well.

For example, in late 2014, amid a surge in acid attacks in Isfahan – a past punishment for women who loosely abided by compulsory hijab laws – Alinejad began using the hashtag #StopAcidAttacks in organizing posts related to these events. Reportedly carried out by religious fundamentalists allied with regime hardliners, several women fell victim to assailants targeting them for improper dress by throwing acid at their faces in a series of drive-by attacks. Alongside updates on victims of the attacks and photos from protests featuring prominent figures like Nasrin Sotoudeh and Narges Mohammadi, who were among those organizing against the violence, the MSF page shared photos of women holding handwritten signs drawing awareness to the attacks alongside images of women's destroyed faces and bodies (Erdbrink 2014).

In another example, women sent videos of themselves singing, which Alinejad organized under the hashtag #MyForbiddenSong, once reports surfaced that Madij Derakhshani, a famous Iranian composer, had been banned from leaving the country for having included “female singers” in his ensemble. In Figure 9, a woman sings in a local Mazandarani dialect while the sounds of public life are heard in the background, protesting the regime's erasure of women's voices in public. Women recorded themselves singing in other posts as well, despite what they openly acknowledged as ordinary singing voices, pointing out how “*even this (unappealing) voice is forbidden*” (StealthyFreedom 1/5/15). Such videos drew attention to Derakhshani's arrest while

information on who or how many administrators manage the page outside of general information on the “About” section which states that page “managers” are located in Germany, the United States, and Canada (see: https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/about_profile_transparency).

organizing women across the country, with no visible ties, to partake in a decentralized action in protest of a ban on female singing.



Figure 9: A woman sings in a Mazandarani dialect as part of the #MyForbiddenSong campaign, protesting a ban on female singing in public with videos showing the same (StealthyFreedom 1/10/15).

Cycling became another focal point of MSF content after it was reported in late 2016 that Friday prayer leaders in Marivan, a town in Kurdistan province, had declared a ban on women cycling. Although there is no law that formally prohibits women from riding bikes in public, women have been targeted and harassed for such activities since the revolution. Thus, once President Rouhani’s administration encouraged biking as an alternative to car-based transportation in an environmentally conscious campaign called “Tuesdays without Vehicles,” other branches of government and authorities in local offices pushed back on women’s participation (RFE/RL 2017). Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, issued a fatwa in the same month outlining that women would only be “permitted to ride motorbikes or bicycles so long as it does not attract strangers or lead to corrupt behavior” with those supporting it subsequently gathering in Tehran, urging authorities to stop such behavior (Supreme Leader’s Press Office 2016; Zamaneh Media 2016).

In response, women shared pictures of themselves biking around Iran despite attempts to ban female cycling. In the caption of one post, a woman sharing a picture of her and her husband biking in a green valley as they both smile writes, “*we don’t plan on this fatwa uprooting our lives*” (masih.alinejad 9/20/16). Dozens of similar photos were shared, often beginning with declarations that women should not “*fall to the weight of such pressure,*” in speaking to government overtures on their rights (masih.alinejad 9/19/16a). Settings varied from tranquil natural landscapes and empty roads to bustling city streets, reinforcing women’s defiance as spread out across the country. Unlike government supporters who could easily gather in public to denounce women’s cycling, female protesters had to find subtler ways to make their stance known. In one post, a woman acknowledges that “*perhaps women cannot take to the streets to protest*” but that their “*silence*” and “*patience*” should not be confused with “*obeyance,*” displaying her protest with a photo of herself standing beside her bike on a gravel road (masih.alinejad 9/19/16b). In another post from a woman noting that she has taken the picture “*in the Supreme Leader’s hometown*” of Mashhad, the sender declares that she “*will live (her) own way*” in doing what she “*loves*” (masih.alinejad 9/19/16c) (see figure 10).

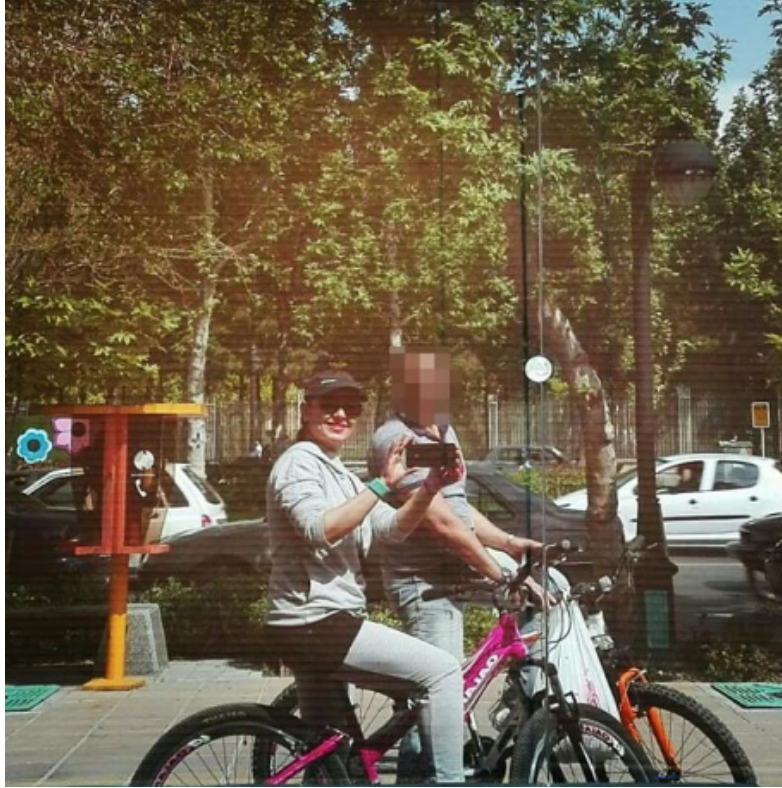


Figure 10: A woman pauses for a selfie while bike riding with a blurred-out figure, showing her biking in the holy city of Mashhad, despite a fatwa from the Supreme Leader restricting women from cycling in public (masih.alinejad 9/19/16c).

Pictures continued to emerge around other regime rhetoric and attempts to suppress women's visual protests by aligning them with broader societal problems. For example, after Yosef Tabatabaei, the Friday prayer leader of Isfahan, declared that unveiled women were causing the drying of the Zayandeh Rud River, Iran's largest and most important river, as punishment for women waging war against religion, several posts emerged questioning the logic of this claim while continuing to show women resisting such statements with pictures of themselves unveiled against large bodies of water. In a picture of a woman sitting unveiled along the Persian Gulf, she claims she will walk along the shores of the Persian Gulf unveiled to show the government's "incompetence" as the reason for environmental disasters, not her being unveiled (StealthyFreedom 6/21/16). In several other posts, women appear unveiled in other parts of Isfahan

in laying claims to the city, questioning why chador-clad women are accepted while women “like them” are not (StealthyFreedom 6/23/16). In a picture showing a woman holding her headscarf as it blows in the wind beside her, she later points out the man walking behind her with nothing but swim shorts, questioning why it is only women without the hijab that causes drought (see figure 11).



Figure 11: A woman standing on a beach holds her headscarf next to her as it sways in the wind, questioning why unveiled women, and not men with only swim shorts (pointing to the figure behind her) do not cause drought (StealthyFreedom 6/16/16).

Authorities often spoke to such instances of women’s defiance by aligning MSF with the “West,” using Alinejad’s involvement in the movement as a symbol of Western plans to subvert the regime’s power and influence. In early 2017, a few months after images of women’s biking and resistance to the Zayandeh Rud statements appeared, Khamenei remarked in a speech on Fatemeh’s birthday (Prophet Mohammad’s daughter), that movements reflecting the belief that women are “a commodity and an object of gratification in the Western world” are “most likely

among Zionist plots aiming to destroy (Iranian) society” (*Khamenei.Ir* 2017). Articles in state media targeting Alinejad appeared frequently between June 2016 and February 2017, many of which were shared by Alinejad on her Instagram. In a screenshot of one article, Alinejad shares an image of her set against Marzieh Hashemi, the American defector who converted to Islam and works for the Iranian news channel “Press TV” (*masih.alinejad* 8/2/16). Comparing Alinejad, who the image claims is allied with the Americans, to Hashemi, who left the United States in search of “real” freedom in Iran, the article seeks to defame Alinejad and denounce her leadership of MSF. In another image, Alinejad’s face is photoshopped with the American and British flags, once again playing on her location in the United States to frame MSF as a Western movement (*masih.alinejad* 1/31/17).²¹

These examples illustrate how authorities’ attempts to suppress the MSF movement inadvertently encouraged new renditions of women’s visual resistance. Images often directly confronted regime rhetoric and newly imposed bans, with captions openly rejecting these restrictions while depicting women engaged in prohibited acts regardless. A defining feature of these images is their immediacy – a stark contrast to earlier content, where women reflected on their “stealthy” freedoms through past experiences, rather than in-the-moment defiance. As the movement evolved and triggered state response, however, women shaped future content in direct relation to government backlash, shortening the timelapse between content production, resistance, and repression. Such acts of defiance additionally shifted towards a range of locations outside natural landscapes, reinforcing both the movement’s growing reach and its increasing visibility in “taking over” the public sphere. The following section examines two of MSF’s most influential

²¹ Alinejad continued to pursue journalistic endeavors along her management of MSF – most notably as a presenter for Voice of America’s Persian language broadcast – in the United States. Critics pointed out her involvement in such networks backed by the U.S. government to claim she was involved in plots to overthrow the Islamic Republic.

campaigns, further demonstrating the intensified pace of women's resistance – a shift from merely demonstrating stealthy freedoms.

#MyCameraIsMyWeapon, Visibilization, and Defending the Right to Choice

In late 2015, a shaky, grainy video appeared on the MSF Facebook page, showing a woman being dragged onto a police van as she screams and resists her arrest. Others visibly attempted to intervene, arguing with the two morality police forcing her off the ground and into the van to let her go but, by the end of the video, the officials succeed in locking her inside before driving away (StealthyFreedom 12/15/15). Captioned, “The scream of this young girl is all too familiar for many,” the post quickly gained traction. It amassed nearly half a million views, becoming part of a growing stream of content under the hashtag *#MyCameraIsMyWeapon*.

#MyCameraIsMyWeapon (دوربین ما اسلحه ما) organized a growing thread of MSF content whereby women documented and shared their encounters with state violence.²² Pictures and videos both revealed the extent of state enforcement of gender laws while also depicting women's resistance, showing them arguing with authorities, resisting their detainment, or physically defending themselves against bodily harm. Many resembled the 2015 footage captured in real-time,²³ depicting arrests filmed in first-person, by those accompanying the victim, or by witnesses who later submitted the clips to Alinejad. Within these videos, women could be seen fighting back

²² This practice of sharing video clips with foreign intermediaries was already a familiar Iranian media practice, as satellite television programs based in the West often broadcasted video clips sent to them from Iran, covering everything from price hikes to political protests (For a more detailed history, see: Mottahedeh, Negar. 2015. *#Iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press). It is thus likely that women adapted this well-established practice to their everyday encounters with the state in MSF. Widespread engagement with videos like the 2015 morality police arrest may also have encouraged other women to follow suit, seeing the value of such content for drawing attention to harassers.

²³ There is one other version of this thread where senders describe their experiences in the recording they send to Alinejad. For example, in a video from 2016, a young fifteen-year-old girl describes how her and her friend outran the morality police earlier that day when shopping for shoes (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1378517068829050>).

against assailants by shouting against them for “ruining their lives” (بدبختی), “turning Iran into hell,” or “instilling fear” into them (StealthyFreedom 7/24/20; 8/21/18). The camera and possibilities for global content-sharing seemingly emboldened victims to defend themselves, using rhetoric that amplified the sentiments of resistance while motivating others to copy similar phrases.

For example, in a two-minute video clip from 2019 showing a group of girls fighting against female morality police officers dragging one of the members of the group by her legs in an attempt to detain her, another member of the group shakily and covertly records the incident while begging officials to release her friend (StealthyFreedom 6/30/19). Later sharing that police had confronted them in the park over their attire, the recorder captures a key moment when her friend is suspended in the air, caught between the officers pulling her legs and her friends holding onto her arms. The victim screams until she is finally released, breaking down in tears and shouting at the officers: “*You have ruined our lives for 40 years!*” (6/30/19). Similar phrases appear in forty-eight other posts where women write, “*The Islamic Republic has taken our bodies hostage for nearly for 40 years,*” or discuss ways to “*stand firm against 40 years of force and humiliation*” (StealthyFreedom 6/3/18; 6/6/18).

The day before the incident, the head of Tehran’s revolutionary court, Mousa Ghazanfarabadi, had announced that anyone sending content to Alinejad would be at risk of spending one to ten years in prison for colluding with a foreign government, highlighting the growing prevalence of such videos and their impact on authorities (Vahdat 2019). Despite such threats, however, the global reach of this content – frequently cross-shared with international media and across various platforms – offered some protection to women in these encounters, hence the word “weapon” in the campaign’s name. For example, some videos captured the ways assailants changed their behavior at the sight of the camera, recognizing the possibilities that the

recording could end up online and lead to their identification and subsequent ridicule, humiliation, or counter-harassment. In one video aptly titled, “Another Street Harasser Running Away,” a woman records a motorist having stopped to harass her for loosely donning the veil. As she records the tail-end of the interaction, she notes how the motorist has gotten back on his bike while visibly trying to cover his face, seeking to evade the possibility that he could become recognized online (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Stills from a video showing a man getting back on his motorbike to speed away after “harassing” the victim while she records him saying that she will “display the video” so he no longer becomes “confident” in interfering in women’s lives in the streets (StealthyFreedom 2/3/21).

By keeping the woman entirely hidden from the lens while drawing attention to the attacker, such clips show how women “flip the script” on who does the surveilling. Whereas the morality police, regime supporters, security cameras, and public displays of propaganda around veiling are meant to ensure compliance through observation and punishment, in these cases, women bring the same accountability to militant tactics of enforcement supported by the regime. They make *assailants* instead of *women* the subjects of scrutiny, which is often enough to change

the assailant’s behavior, showing how the camera can provide women a barrier of safety against such interactions.

This impact is clear in moments where victims urgently tell those accompanying them to “Record! Record!” as a form of defense during tense conflicts (StealthyFreedom 6/23/19). But nevertheless, the camera and the visibility it provides do not exclusively benefit women. In some videos, the aggressor responds by recording as well, often stating that they will send the footage to authorities in weaponizing digital visualization for their own purposes. As a result, several videos capture these reciprocal interactions, where both parties film each other with opposing intentions. One woman highlights this dynamic by recording her aggressor while being filmed in return. In the video, she remarks, “As soon as she (the assailant) saw the camera, her attitude changed completely, and she started recording too.” She goes further to note that her aggressor’s reaction reflects fear, emphasizing that she clearly appears “afraid of the camera” in turning the same action the victim uses to empower her, a sign of weakness for the assailant (see Figure 13).

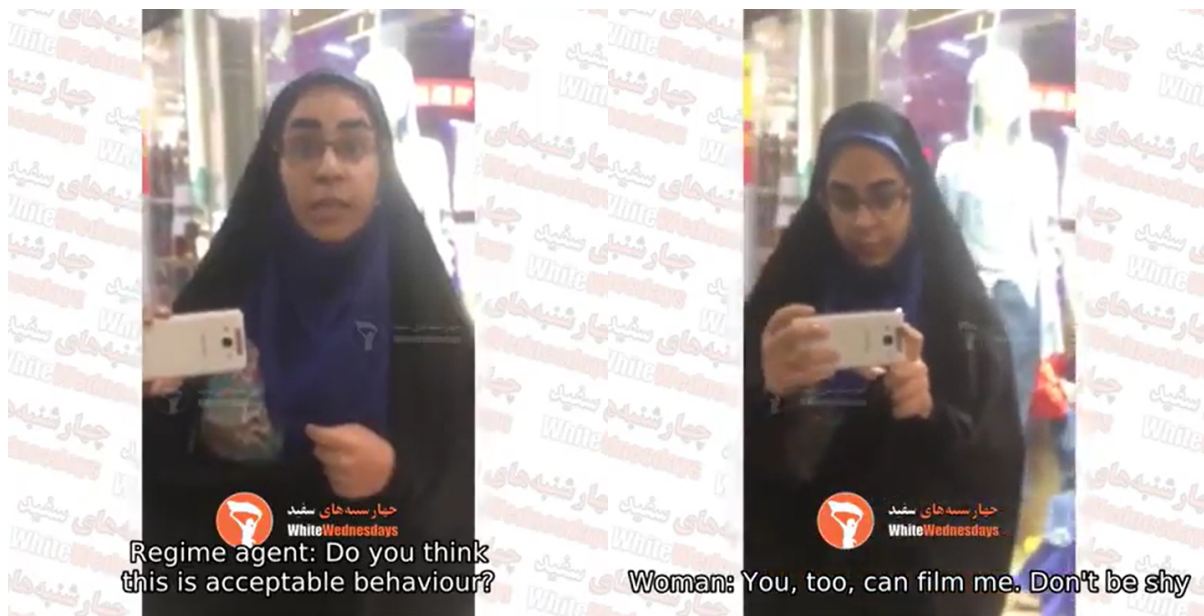


Figure 13: Video stills showing a woman recording the victim in retaliation for the victim recording her as part of the #MyCameraIsMyWeapon campaign (StealthyFreedom 7/8/18).

In early MSF pictures, women emphasized their freedom of choice – a phrase which similarly reappeared in many #MyCameraIsMyWeapon videos as women defend themselves against aggressors by asserting their right to dress as a *private* matter, one that does not warrant interference from others. These videos directly challenge the doctrine of “promoting virtue and preventing vice,” which grants ordinary citizens the authority to police moral conduct. By reframing unveiled hair and relaxed dress codes as exercises in choice, women push back against attempts at legitimizing the surveillance of women’s bodies and public altercations as moral concerns. For example, in a video where a woman records a passerby harassing her for being improperly unveiled, the subject uses the excuse that “*ten men are going to bother them*” because of how they dress, citing an instance where several men allegedly kidnapped a woman for her appearance. She responds sharply that “*this is because of unsafety in our society, it has nothing to do with hijab*” (StealthyFreedom 1/24/19). The interaction escalates as another man intervenes, questioning the harasser's claim that he is merely warning the women about potential harassment. The second man counters: “*No one is bothering them,*” adding, “***It’s their business***” how they choose to dress (1/24/19, emphasis added).

These videos illustrate how violent confrontations often stem from the regime’s encouragement of ordinary citizens to police women’s behavior in the absence of state authorities, under the pretext of preserving public morality. This system places the burden on women to prevent such conflicts by adhering to the dress code, reinforcing the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's attire determines her safety. In one video, a woman directly challenges this notion by stating, “*When we remove our hijab, it’s not a green light for men to rape us,*” reframing dress as a matter of personal choice rather than public harm. Such statements push back against a long-standing legal and cultural trope in Iran, which often shifts blame onto victims of sexual violence

by accusing them of “inviting” assault through their clothing or behavior.²⁴ Authorities often rely on such rhetoric in discrediting women associated with MSF, accusing them of wanting to “get naked” while threatening them with sexual violence as punishment. One participant of the campaign even reported in an interview that authorities threatened they would “rape (her) right here” if she did not cease her involvement with MSF (Dekhordi 2019).

Such threats are part of a long-standing pattern in how authorities respond to MSF. In fact, within a month of MSF’s launch, Iranian state media circulated a fabricated story accusing Alinejad of public indecency, claiming she had stripped naked in front of her son in London while under the influence of hallucinogens (Moaveni 2014). A state reporter went further, claiming that Alinejad was “just trying to compensate her psychological (and probably financial) needs by recruiting young women and sharing her notoriety with younger women who are still not prostitutes,” speaking directly to Alinejad’s administration of the MSF page (2014). These attacks echoed the regime’s historical use of rape as both a justification for forced veiling and a method of intimidation against dissenting women. In response, Alinejad filed a formal complaint against Iranian state media for spreading the false narrative (Alinejad 2018). However, in unveiling what she called her “real revenge,” Alinejad also uploaded a video of herself doing “*what the hardliners are most petrified of*”: a video of her singing in a London subway station unveiled (Alinejad 2014).

²⁴ Regime officials often use rape as a pretense for women’s needing to veil. In a report on the “Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims in Iran,” the analysts make note of the longstanding belief across many Middle Eastern countries that “young women who dress less modestly are more likely to be seen as responsible for provoking rape,” making rape victims out to be complicitous rather than at the receiving end of rape crimes (for more details, see: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1486119/FULLTEXT01.pdf>). A fabricated story on Alinejad’s sexual assault after the removal of her clothing likely drew on similar myths in showing how women’s rejection of modesty invites rape and sexual assault.

#WhiteWednesdays and Women's Takeover of Public Space

The day after Hassan Rouhani's presidential election in 2017, a group of chador-clad women staged a protest against what they viewed as a more lenient approach toward unveiled or loosely veiled women who had supported his candidacy. A widely circulated video from the protest showed one participant condemning "*immodest*" and "*shameless*" women, prompting a wave of online responses rejecting her authoritarian views on women's dress in Iran (masih.alinejad 5/21/17). One post showed three women tossing their veils in the air and smiling for the camera with a caption reading "*we can choose a president, but we are not allowed to choose what to wear*" (StealthyFreedom 5/21/17). Two other posts, however, encouraged a more forceful stance against the compulsory hijab.

One video, shared as part of Alinejad's news broadcast, showed a woman holding a sign reading "Wednesdays without force," while encouraging women "*wherever they are in the world, to partake each week in a small act of protest against compulsory hijab*" (StealthyFreedom 5/23/17a). Another video showed a woman donning a white headscarf, standing beside two men with white ribbons tied to their wrists. Speaking directly to the conservative participant of the chador protests, she addressed her as "*my dear friend*" and affirmed her right to wear the chador, asking that the same right be granted to her. In the video, she also announced that her and her companions had joined the "*Wednesdays Without Hijab*' campaign," encouraging others to join as well by wearing "*a white symbol each Wednesday*" in protest of compulsory hijab laws (StealthyFreedom 5/23/17b).

Within two weeks, over 200 photos and videos of women participating in what became the "White Wednesdays" (چهارشنبه های سفید) campaign were shared across Alinejad's Instagram and the MSF Facebook. Many of these pictures showed women donning white headscarves while

smiling for a selfie, declaring in the caption that they would “*attain freedom themselves*” by filling the city with “*white symbols against force*” (StealthyFreedom 5/30/17). In one video, a young man announces he has joined the campaign in support of his mother who is “*smart enough to choose what she wants to wear for herself*” (StealthyFreedom 6/15/17). Another shows a couple recording themselves as they walk in a busy shopping mall, the woman donning a white headscarf alongside her husband in a white T-shirt, using this moment to request support from other husbands, fathers, and sons for the women in their lives (StealthyFreedom 6/28/17). By the end of the first month, dozens of similar images appeared across social media while international news had also begun covering the protests (Hatam 2017).

Many of these posts followed a common pattern whereby individuals announced that they “too” had joined the campaign, explained their reasons or suggested steps women could take to achieve their rights, and concluded by encouraging others to participate as well (see Figure 14). Ten days after the campaign's launch, an audio recording was shared on the MSF Facebook page in which a prayer leader from a city near Tehran condemned the movement as a foreign effort to encourage women into prostitution (StealthyFreedom 6/3/17). Like many of MSF's other campaigns which emerged as the result of attempts to suppress further protests, numerous posts emerged in the following weeks in response, including videos of women who “*take pride in wearing the hijab*” but rejected the notion that others should be denied the right to choose it for themselves (masih.alinejad 6/4/17). Another video compilation, sent by multiple women from Saveh – the town where the cleric gave his speech – shows them recording themselves from the nose down, avoiding full facial identification, while wearing white veils. In these videos, they assert their demands for “*freedom, respect, and security,*” – the same rights afforded to veiled women (StealthyFreedom 6/14/17).



Figure 14: A video still of a woman recording herself partaking in the #WhiteWednesdays campaign against compulsory hijab laws, encouraging others to join as well (StealthyFreedom 5/24/17).

As pictured in the video still and the Saveh example from above, the state's evolving responses to MSF, including speeches and stricter enforcement of hijab laws in workplaces,²⁵ heightened concerns on government surveillance which motivated participants to begin taking precautions to avoid identification. In balancing visibility with the need to avoid government surveillance, many women thus posed with their backs to the camera, obscuring their faces with sunglasses, hair, signs, props, or used angles that limit facial recognition. In 1,103 pictures and videos that I examined across MSF, many of which overlapped with White Wednesdays, the subject's face was either completely or partially obscured. Alongside submitting content to Alinejad through the encrypted messaging application, Telegram, these strategies were crucial to evading state retaliation against those participants of MSF.

²⁵ Iranian media announced shortly after the launch of White Wednesdays that regional branches of the regime would visit local government offices to ensure that women were observing the hijab properly (StealthyFreedom 5/30/17).

In Iran, on and offline surveillance has increasingly relied on facial recognition software which cross-references facial features with government databases, such as passport records, to identify individuals. Since 2015, the Iranian government has expanded this surveillance infrastructure through collaborations with Iranian and Chinese technology firms (Loucaides 2024). The Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Cyber Defense Command (GCDC), a surveillance agency established in 2006, has also integrated facial recognition into its broader efforts to monitor and regulate online visual content (Golkar 2022). This is evident in how regime officials began targeting Instagram models in 2016, for example, as a way to "sterilize" the web of immoral content (*BBC News* 2016). By May of the same year, over 170 models were identified through an operation known as "Spider II," which reportedly used facial recognition software to detect images of women without head coverings (*Al Jazeera* 2016). The following year, female bodybuilders were similarly targeted and detained for posting "semi-nude" photos of themselves online, identified through the same surveillance technology used in the prior crackdown (*IranWire* 2017).

Participants of White Wednesdays faced similar risks, as those whose unobscured images appeared online were often identified, summoned by police, and subsequently interrogated and arrested. In 2019, one woman described being arrested twice for her involvement with MSF before ultimately fleeing Iran for her safety (Dekhordi 2019). She had been summoned to the revolutionary court in Saqqez, Kurdistan province, on charges of "participating in the White Wednesdays campaign" and "encouraging other women to remove their hijab" (2019). MSF has also reported on the arrests of individuals featured on its platform. For instance, in 2020, the page announced that a woman had been detained after videos surfaced of her cycling unveiled in Najafabad the previous day (StealthyFreedom 10/20/20). Authorities often emphasize the rapid

response time between an image’s publication and an arrest, using this “quick turnaround” as a demonstration of the state’s stronghold on power.

As a result, one of the most common obscuration tactics in White Wednesdays was posing with one’s back to the camera in making hair the focal point of the image. Using such tactics, participants increased protections for protest, which was crucially seen in campaigns such as #WalkingUnveiled – an offshoot of White Wednesdays which showed women walking unveiled throughout public locations in Iran. In these videos, it was common for a third person to film women as they walked unveiled in front of them, narrating the experience by noting the video’s location or describing events that occurred before the recording began, keeping women’s identities hidden from view (see Figure 15).



Figure 15: Two women walk in Urmia, a city in Azerbaijan province, as part of the White Wednesdays and #WalkingUnveiled campaign. A third person speaks over the recording, noting how the women walk “fearlessly” (StealthyFreedom 3/21/18).

Noting the location was a common feature of many of these videos, showing the geographic diversity of participants while “overtaking” different facets of public space. For example, twenty-two videos specifically mention Isfahan – a city known for its more conservative social climate compared to Tehran – underscoring the significance of women publicly removing their veils in areas where such actions face greater resistance. In other instances, women strategically posed in front of regime symbols of authority, such as government propaganda, office buildings, signs, placards, and banners enforcing hijab laws, “upping the ante” on their rebellion to further challenge the regime’s authority.

Taking pictures in front of such signs and symbols was common in the early days of MSF, while becoming more frequent in White Wednesdays. Signs both paradoxically represent the state’s presence and absence as a symbol of its control (Shahrokni 2019). Women thus cleverly highlighted this contradiction by capturing themselves unveiled and smiling beside slogans declaring, “Hijab means honor, freedom, pride, and devotion,” “Hijab is a tool for showing you’re not a tool,” or more direct pleas to “Please abide by hijab laws” (StealthyFreedom 4/20/17).²⁶ In some pictures, women took pictures and videos directly in front of mosques, clerics, or even the morality police in mocking such concentrations of state power, often used to force women into compliance (see Figure 16).

²⁶ Such banners can be interpreted as the regime’s tacit admittance that women do not always abide by compulsory hijab laws in parks and open spaces. Given the state’s inability to police all public spaces, banners acknowledge this limitation yet seek to make up for it by reminding those inhabiting them that they continue to occupy a public, controlled site.



Figure 16: A woman poses unveiled in front of a mobile police station on a beach in Iran (StealthyFreedom 11/4/19).

Normalizing Women’s Unveiled Public Presence

A key framing of such acts of dissent came through the emphasis on women's agency in exercising choice, despite the state's enforcement of hijab laws through propaganda and surveillance. In a common expression heard throughout many MSF videos, women mention “always dressing like this,” reinforcing the idea that their defiance is not a temporary or isolated act but an ongoing practice whereby they often ditch the veil when out in public. This framing extends the action beyond a single moment or location to show an act that women are *already* partaking in, much like in earlier MSF videos. The key distinction, however, is that while earlier videos showed women visibilizing “stealthy” freedoms – i.e. removing the veil or riding a bike in a quiet corner of the country where morality police were less likely present – these acts visibilize removing the veil or partaking in other gender-banned acts out in the open.

Recording herself walking home with her veil draped on her shoulder, a woman in one video notes that she frequently takes this route without a headscarf (StealthyFreedom 8/22/17). A young woman walking with her maghnaeh on her shoulders as her friend records her similarly mentions that “*civil disobedience*” is not confined to Wednesdays but occurs “*seven days a week*” (StealthyFreedom 5/1/18). In a self-recording of her and several other women walking in a busy street unveiled, another woman recounts an interaction she had at a shopping mall while walking unveiled as part of her normal routine. She notes that a man, seeing her without the headscarf, stopped and asked, “whether today was White Wednesdays,” demonstrating what she sees as a sign that these acts are becoming increasingly “*normal*” for people (StealthyFreedom 2/3/19).

These examples show how women connect their present actions to those outside the frame of the camera to demonstrate their growing defiance. A key part of how women overcome this temporal divide while showing their “overtaking” of public space is through the *normalization* of their actions. As a discursive strategy, normalization has been a practice of many social movements in framing their identities and goals against myths promoted by the state and opposing groups (Krzyżanowski 2020). For example, AIDS activists in ACT UP, a gay and lesbian coalition that formed in the 1980s in response to the AIDS crisis, battled stigmas around AIDS as “a marker of homosexuality, drug abuse, moral deficiencies – stigmas added to those of sexual transmission, terminal disease, and, for many, skin color” (Gamson 1989, 359) by normalizing their presence. Similar to how cannabis turned from being a main target in the war of drugs to the most tolerated substance (Skliamis 2022), activists reclaimed labels used to stigmatize and repress them, built positive identities through new categorization schemes, and resisted domination through new understandings of “rational” behavior that “challenge the process by which this identity (abnormality) was and is defined (Gamson 1989, 352).

Framing movement goals through rationality, logic, and common sense counters negative categorization attempts, while also delineating from rival groups who seek to promote a movement's deviant identity (Currier 2010). What is deemed "normal" is thus a site of contestation between the state, activists, and other actors, taking shape through discourses seeking to capture the movement from each side (Amouroux 2009). This struggle plays out across the cultural realm through the use of symbols, labels, and practices that simultaneously become the targets of reappropriation by various actors towards divergent goals. For instance, disability rights groups have articulated their demand for a "normal life" by advocating for inclusion within the fabric of their communities and cultures using societal expectation and responsibility as discursive frames (Flynn and Lemay 1999). Arguing that society has an inherent responsibility to care for all its members, these groups connected their demands to purpose, inclusion, and civic responsibility, reclaiming labels – i.e. words such as *disability* or *incapacity* – that inherently seek to position members outside of society (1999).

In MSF, later posts demonstrate this growing normalization by discursively framing women's actions as boring and ordinary, often relying on societal interactions between unveiled women and veiled women and men to make this claim. For example, a video of a woman wearing a white manteau with her shawl draped over her shoulders in cutting across her long blonde hair, shows her walking through a crowd of chador-clad women near the entrance of a nature site seemingly unbothered (see Figure 17). Captioning the post, "No One Cursed Me," the woman draws attention to the moment in the video when she removes the scarf completely, conveying confidence despite what is tacitly implied as difficulty maneuvering such settings. The video's caption further reads, "*The city must get used to seeing us women who don't want the compulsory hijab,*" using this moment as an example re-shaping public opinions around unveiled women.



Figure 17: An unveiled woman walks through a crowd of chador-clad women near the entrance of a nature site in Iran, seemingly unbothered (StealthyFreedom 10/24/2017).

By emphasizing routine actions and ordinariness, these videos challenge the fear associated with being unveiled while countering the regime’s narrative that women’s immodest dress poses a societal threat. To reinforce this, women deliberately choose busy public spaces for their protest to show the increased normalization of unveiled women. In one video, the recorder, filming her three unveiled friends walking through a mall, observes that “*these days, we see a lot of brave women walking without the veil in busy locations,*” contrasting their presence with the surrounding crowds (StealthyFreedom 8/7/19). Similarly, others note that “*no one is bothering me*” – i.e. the video’s subjects – which reinforces unveiling as an unremarkable act (StealthyFreedom 3/9/19). In another video, a woman walking unveiled along a popular lake comments on other women seen jogging, cycling, and interacting with men without experiencing harassment or interference (see Figure 18). Unlike #MyCameraIsMyWeapon, which exposes the harassment and violence women face for violating morality laws, these videos foreground the mundane – often opening with details about

the location, date, and weather – before emphasizing the perceived normalcy of women’s presence and actions.



Figure 18: Stills from a self-recording of an unveiled woman walking alongside a lake in Iran, noting that she has seen other women without their veils or riding bikes, both of which are banned for women, without them enduring any harassment (StealthyFreedom 7/3/19).

These videos further define “freedom of choice” by framing a woman’s clothing as a private matter, drawing from past examples that illustrate public dress as forms of individual expressions that should not concern others. At the same time, they depict those who oppose this view as intrusive and even barbaric. In one video, a young girl walking unveiled down a busy street as a man passes by without so much as a glance, takes advantage of this moment to show how “*people don’t care at all*” whether women are veiled or unveiled (StealthyFreedom 8/20/18). This depiction of indifference reinforces the idea that women’s dress should not be a subject of public scrutiny, contrasting with another video which captures a chador-clad woman as she harasses an unveiled passerby. The victim recording the encounter begins with the statement, “*You should learn not to interfere in people’s private lives*” as she defends herself and inverts the roles unveiled women and bystanders play (StealthyFreedom 12/27/20). Unveiled women are framed as embodying normalcy and self-determination, while those who seek to police their choices are

rather cast not merely as harassers but as individuals engaging in an unnecessary and obsessive intrusion.

This “flipped script” becomes increasingly evident in the final months and years of MSF leading up to the start of Woman, Life, Freedom. Although content on MSF declined significantly between 2020 and 2022 – likely due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decentralization of content-sharing following “Girls of Revolution Street” and the rise of Iran’s #MeToo movement²⁷ – many of the images that continued to surface blended elements of both White Wednesdays and #MyCameraIsMyWeapon, integrating their underlying discourses and practices. One such video captures a cleric filming a woman he accuses of “*removing the hijab*” and insulting him, in what appears to be an attempt to document and intimidate her (StealthyFreedom 12/20/21). However, much like the videos associated with #MyCameraIsMyWeapon, the woman's own recording was initiated in response to his harassment. She reinforces a central tenet of White Wednesdays by asserting that her choice of dress is “*none of (his) business,*” highlighting continued resistance to surveillance and moral policing while presumably remaining unveiled despite the cleric’s harassment.

These videos continue to reinforce the narrative that women’s subversive actions are ordinary, while those attempting to police them are depicted as disruptive and out of place. This dynamic becomes increasingly evident in later footage where confrontations between unveiled women and their harassers draw in bystanders to defend women's right to free expression and choice. Such examples show how the fear which largely mitigated women’s picture-taking and sharing on MSF in 2014-15 is no longer an active element in the construction of an “image-event,”

²⁷ For a detailed history of the movement, see: Yaghoobi, Claudia. 2023. *The #MeToo Movement in Iran: Reporting Sexual Violence and Harassment*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

rather replaced by concerns for what is right/wrong, normal/abnormal, and active harassment versus private choice (Delicath and DeLuca 2003).

For example, in one video an unveiled woman arguing with a chador-clad woman on a bus is quickly supported by several passengers who intervene, telling the veiled woman she has “*no right to interfere*” before ultimately forcing her off the bus (StealthyFreedom 12/6/21). In another, the recorder openly mocks a woman who is on the phone reporting the bus driver for refusing to eject her as an unveiled passenger breaking the law (StealthyFreedom 7/12/21). Perhaps the most striking example of this shift in framing – where the unveiled woman is positioned as the norm and those attempting to control her as unwelcome intruders (مزاحم) – is captured in Figure 19. In the video, a cleric, visibly agitated, confronts a woman outside a mosque for drinking water during Ramadan while unveiled, insisting she must cover herself and refrain from such behavior. However, rather than complying, the woman remains put while several bystanders instead escort the cleric away, telling him he has no right to harass her. As he protests, claiming that “*they (women) are ruining the country,*” one onlooker dismisses him with a sharp retort: “*Screw your ‘country’*” (StealthyFreedom 7/5/22).



Figure 19: Stills from a video showing a cleric harassing a woman for being unveiled and drinking water during Ramadan before being escorted away by several men who interfere in the scenario (StealthyFreedom 7/5/22).

Conclusion

My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) emerged as a platform for women to document their agency against public morality laws. It provided a virtual space where women could share their “private” experiences of navigating the “public” enforcement of morality laws while resisting them within the carved-out spaces of the state-controlled public sphere. Over time, however, images shared on the platform evolved, shifting from covert forms of defiance and agency to increasingly visible acts of resistance in public spaces, regardless of state surveillance. This transformation was driven in part by the diminishing role of fear – which largely mitigated compliance in the past – in shaping women’s choices regarding public dress and behavior. Seeing others engage in similar acts of defiance, combined with the protective affordances of social media which offered a degree of safety from state backlash, women slowly “took to the streets” in defying public morality laws in a more direct and daring way.

Ironically, the regime itself played a role in accelerating this shift. Each time authorities attempted to suppress or respond to new actions associated with MSF, participants of the movement felt compelled to respond – sparking new campaigns and visual motifs that molded around state repression. This dynamic shows how the hybrid nature of digital images, through the select visibility it provides, can be manipulated towards new forms of resistance – ones which women leveraged in critiquing state practices of control while expanding the discursive space around choice, freedom, and bodily autonomy.

These tendencies materialized in the way women performed both “stealthy” and later, more overt, acts of defiance for the camera. Women linked unveiling to joy, liberation, and self-expression – experiences they had been deprived of since the Islamic Revolution – by incorporating elements of dance, song, cycling, and playfulness into their content. Rather than

solely framing their grievances around deprivation, however, they framed them around assertions of agency through actions in the present. Even in #MyCameraIsMyWeapon where the visibility the camera brought instigators of violence on women often prompted them to counter-record in defense or flee the situation, women became equipped with a way to fight compulsion in maintaining their public appearance, etching a space for the broader acceptance they were seeking.

One of the key benefits such visualization practices offered women outside of prefiguratively living out the aims of their protest was resisting state discourses seeking to frame their actions as “Western,” non-native, “immoral,” or a “societal threat.” By capturing themselves as joyful and ordinary – often drawing on the apparent disinterest of those pictured around them – women flipped the script on who was perceived as normal. The state, rather than unveiled woman, became the subject of scrutiny, with its responses appearing increasingly violent, paranoid, and irrational against the peaceful expressions of personal choice captured in MSF. This “flipped script” became especially evident in later videos, where bystanders not only tolerated unveiled women but actively defended them against aggressors. In doing so, MSF helped construct a new moral order in which unveiled women were increasingly seen as the norm, shaping the trajectory of future acts of resistance against the state.

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CHAPTER 5: KINSHIP, COALITION, AND SOLIDARITY IN *THE GIRLS OF REVOLUTION STREET*

On December 27, 2017, a young woman climbed atop a utility box on one of Tehran's busiest streets, standing unveiled as she waved a white headscarf tied to a stick above the passing crowds and traffic. Dressed in a simple black tracksuit, her long black hair cascading over her shoulders, she appeared silent in the many photos and videos that quickly spread on social media, capturing the incident on Revolution Street (see Figure 1). In one video, a motorist recording the initial moments of the young woman's act identifies it as a "White Wednesdays protest," recognizing the symbolic significance of the white headscarf and her decision to climb the utility box on a Wednesday (StealthyFreedom 12/29/17). Other social media posts shared that the woman had spoken about "freedom" and the "right to choice" (StealthyFreedom 12/28/17), while news articles captured the moment as "the quietest protest Iran has ever witnessed," referring to the woman's "silent waving (of her headscarf) like a flag" (Wright 2018).

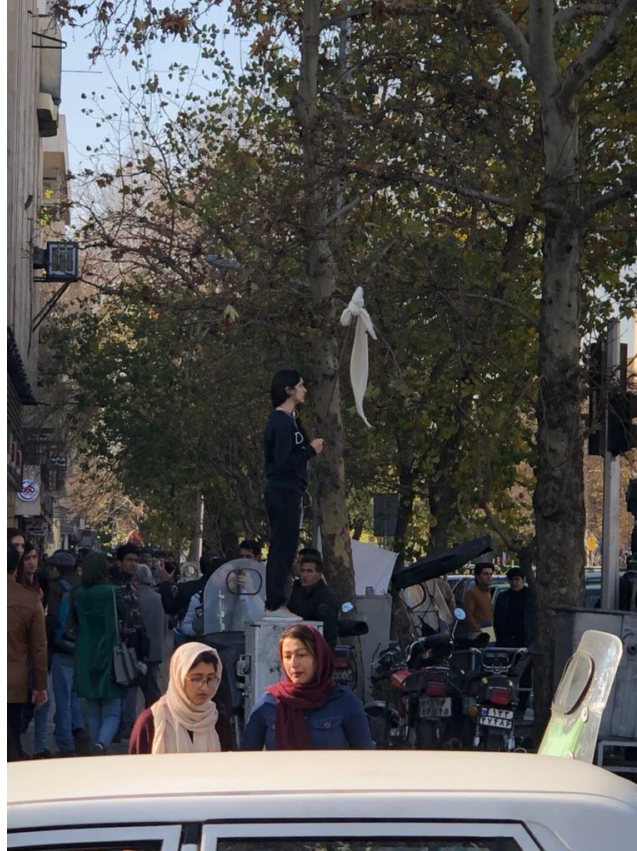


Figure 20: A woman captured standing atop a utility box on Tehran's Revolution Street, waving a white headscarf on a stick while people gather around and observe the action (X: [@Tavaana](#), 12/28/17).

Despite initial uncertainty surrounding her identity and the precise intent behind her action, the woman soon referred to as the *Girl of Revolution Street* marked a turning point in women's protests in Iran, setting the stage for a new wave of defiance over the course of the following year. In 2018, the MSF Facebook page shared 212 photos and videos of women and men lifting white headscarves around Iran, mentioning the Girl of Revolution Street, or acting in support of her protest. In addition to hundreds of other images shared across Instagram and Twitter, these photos captured a new model of resistance based on heightened visibility, overt defiance, and solidarity. While these elements were also present across MSF, the highly stylized pictures of women's hair blowing in the wind, intentionally posing unveiled for the camera, or recording instances of harassment for public exposure stood in stark contrast to the calm, stoic acts of defiance captured

second-hand by passersby during the 2018 protests. These pictures built upon MSF’s gradual forging of spaces of resistance to public morality laws but added a crucial dimension to the process: the visualization of mass support for women.

A video from the one-year anniversary of The Girl of Revolution Street’s protest exemplifies this expanded visual motif. As several women walk through a crowded park with their white headscarves draped over their shoulders “in memory of the first Girl of Revolution Street,” another woman records and narrates the scene (see Figure 2). Cheers and applause erupt from those around them, accompanied by shouts of *Moshallah!* (a phrase expressing approval or acknowledgement) and *Afarrin!* (meaning “well done” or “bravo”). In the background, two men wave their arms in solidarity, while a third excitedly calls someone off-camera to “take a picture!”



Figure 21: A video still of several women walking in a public park in Iran in defiance of compulsory hijab laws on the anniversary of the first Girl of Revolution Street’s protest. Passersby clap and cheer for them in the video, signaling support for their protest (StealthyFreedom 12/27/18).

Such videos subverted not only the morally constructed public spaces and gendered authoritarian practices that uphold compliance to public morality laws, but they visualized a growing network of solidarity around women’s resistance. What became collectively known as the

“Girls of Revolution Street” protests (GRS), inserted images into what Diani and McAdam (2003) call “network variables” which sustain participation, interest, and support for a movement. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, community linkages, or *kinship ties*, laid the groundwork for mobilizing around an opportunity to further escalate protests with International Women’s Day on March 8th. Whereas MSF had previously tried to coordinate larger actions against the state by calling for mass protests, GRS succeeded in orchestrating the first decentralized “takeover” of public space through various protest acts emerging across Iran on the same day. These dispersed acts became an important catalyst for future iterations of the same in Woman, Life, Freedom which I explore in the following chapter.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, MSF played a key role in driving the transformation of women’s stealthy expressions of freedom into public displays of resistance. Through practices of joy and the gradual normalization of women’s acts as contrasted with passersby’s nonchalant reactions to unveiled women, MSF engaged new discourses on freedom and choice while innovating a new visual motif of resistance that other women imitated in creating a decentralized movement. The state’s increasingly repressive response only reinforced its portrayal as an oppressive force, seeking to maintain control over women’s bodies at all costs, while a focus on defiance inserted pictures into a process of decolonizing the male, segregated public sphere.

In this chapter, I show how GRS contributed to this process with a highly visible form of protest to compulsory hijab – a practice that enmeshed with key rifts in the Iranian regime’s structure to expose vulnerabilities in its management of public morality. In some cases, regime authorities inadvertently contributed to the solidification of the network created around GRS which further exacerbated difficulties in handling protests. In other cases, the harsh response to GRS protests – on a level unseen in MSF until then – signaled a gradual erosion of state control over

the public sphere. The more authoritarian states run low on legitimacy and struggle to cultivate public support, the more they are forced to use the “sticks” over “carrots” in their toolkit (Rasler 1996; Maerz 2020). GRS protests exemplify this shift, showing how the Iranian state moved further in the direction of a new era of intensified repression (Parsa 2020; Golkar 2022).

The Rise of *Girls of Revolution Street*

After the woman’s roughly hour-long protest ended on December 27th and images of her spread across Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, and other social media, social media users began questioning her whereabouts. A post shared on the MSF Facebook suggested she had been “*arrested following her protest along with the same young people who had supported her*” (StealthyFreedom 12/28/17). However, with her identity still unknown and no official confirmation of her detention, other social media posts began including the hashtag #*Where_Is_She* (#دختر_خیابان_انقلاب_کجاست), alongside her images to draw attention to her protest and missing status.

At the same time, a new wave of mass public protests was erupting across Iran. On December 28th, government hardliners had organized a rally in Khorasan, a province in northeastern Iran, to denounce President Hassan Rouhani’s so-called “liberalization” of Iranian politics (Kadivar et al. 2024). The demonstration, however, took an unexpected turn as chants over worsening economic conditions quickly escalated into broader grievances against the regime, sparking a nationwide movement calling for change (2024). What became known as the *Dey Protests* reached its peak between December 28th and the first week of January before authorities swiftly cracked down on the movement. This period of unrest coincided with mounting demands

on social media for accountability regarding the Girl of Revolution Street, who had disappeared following her solo act of protest.

Alongside these demands, a series of new pictures and videos in solidarity with the missing woman began appearing on social media. Just two days after the initial protest on Revolution Street, another woman was filmed raising her white headscarf on a stick in Bojnord, a city in northeastern Iran, in a video shared on the MSF Facebook page (12/31/17). While it is unclear whether the footage was sent directly to Alinejad for publication, the woman's appearance closely mirrored that of the Girl of Revolution Street, dressed in a dark sweatshirt and pants, but with the addition of a surgical mask covering the lower half of her face. In another video posted a few days later, a woman walks with a white headscarf tied to a stick, recording herself as she encourages others to move beyond symbolic gestures, stating that from now on acts of defiance should extend beyond simply "removing the headscarf to take a picture" (StealthyFreedom 1/2/18). Similarly, in a separate video, another woman declared her support for the "girl on Revolution Street" by capturing a moment in her walk to work without the mandatory hijab (StealthyFreedom 1/3/18).

These images demonstrate the close connections between GRS and MSF from the outset of the movement. While both scholarly and media accounts have criticized the conflation of the two movements, arguing that GRS is a grassroots movement with no connections to Alinejad or the MSF page (a claim Alinejad has repeatedly addressed in MSF posts),²⁸ my analysis showed undeniable linkages between MSF and GRS. Rather than viewing them as entirely separate

²⁸ For scholarly repudiations, see: Seddighi, Gilda, and Sara Tafakori. 2016. "Transnational Mediation of State Gendered Violence: The Case of Iran." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (5): 925–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1213575>; Ranjbar, A. Marie. 2021. "Soapboxes and Stealth on Revolution Street." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 20 (4): 346–65; and Tafakori, Sara. 2021. "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47 (1): 47–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715649>. For an article criticizing Alinejad's feigned leadership of the women's movement, see: <https://publicseminar.org/2023/09/is-masih-alinejad-really-the-voice-of-the-iranian-womens-movement/>.

entities, I thus argue for a reconceptualization that frames GRS and MSF as interconnected *waves* of women's mobilization, each reinforcing and building upon the other. One goal of this chapter is to highlight the way women's visual acts of protest inspire new iterations in others, regardless of the movement under which they are categorized. This is why I primarily rely on content from the MSF Facebook page while supplementing this with posts from Twitter and Instagram to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the movement's broader impact and evolution.

Recognizing these connections, it is thus unsurprising that MSF featured twenty posts referencing the Girl of Revolution Street and her protest within the first month of the GRS movement alone. In every White Wednesdays post over the six weeks following the December 27th protest, the hashtag #GirlsofRevolutionStreet (دختران_خیابان_انقلاب) appeared alongside images of women lifting or waving white headscarves in solidarity with – or as direct participants in – GRS. One of these posts shows a woman walking with a sign taped to her chest demanding the release of the Girl of Revolution Street (see Figure 3). Standing next to a white headscarf hung off a branch, she engages a similarly serious tone to that of many GRS pictures, a sharp turn from the practiced joy in MSF.



Figure 22: A woman stands next to her white headscarf hung on branch with a sign across her chest reading “Free my sister who you arrested on Revolution Street” (StealthyFreedom 1/9/18).

In another video, a woman is recorded walking through a traffic-clogged roundabout, swinging her black headscarf in the air. Sent directly to Alinejad for publication on the MSF page, the accompanying caption credits “the brave girl from Revolution Street who showed us the way” (StealthyFreedom 1/10/18). A woman similarly refers to the mysterious figure, as she shares a video of herself walking around a roundabout in the middle of a traffic jam swinging her black headscarf around. The caption states that while authorities “arrested a lone girl waving her white headscarf on Revolution Street,” they will now have to deal with many others “repeat(ing) her protest” (StealthyFreedom 1/17/18). Two additional posts from the Tavaana X page similarly depict a man and a woman standing along a busy road at night, each waving a white headscarf in solidarity ([X.com/Tavaana](https://x.com/Tavaana), 1/24/18; [X.com/Tavaana](https://x.com/Tavaana), 1/24/18).

These posts continued to circulate alongside the #Where_Is_She hashtag, maintaining public attention on the still-unknown fate of the protester. However, by the end of January, a major

development reignited momentum, sparking a new wave of protest actions. On January 28th, the famed lawyer and civil rights activist, Nasrin Sotoudeh, announced on her Facebook page that “the Girl of Revolution Street was freed”, alongside other details that she had begun representing her a few days earlier before securing her release ([X.com/Tavaana, 1/28/18](https://twitter.com/Tavaana/status/9876543210)). The woman was identified as 31 year-old Vida Movahed using a selfie of her with her 20-month-old baby (Mostaghim and Bengali 2018). In solidarity with her release, on January 29th, a second woman stood atop the same utility box on Revolution Street, holding a stick tied with a white headscarf, in a scene almost identical to Movahed’s initial protest (see Figure 4).

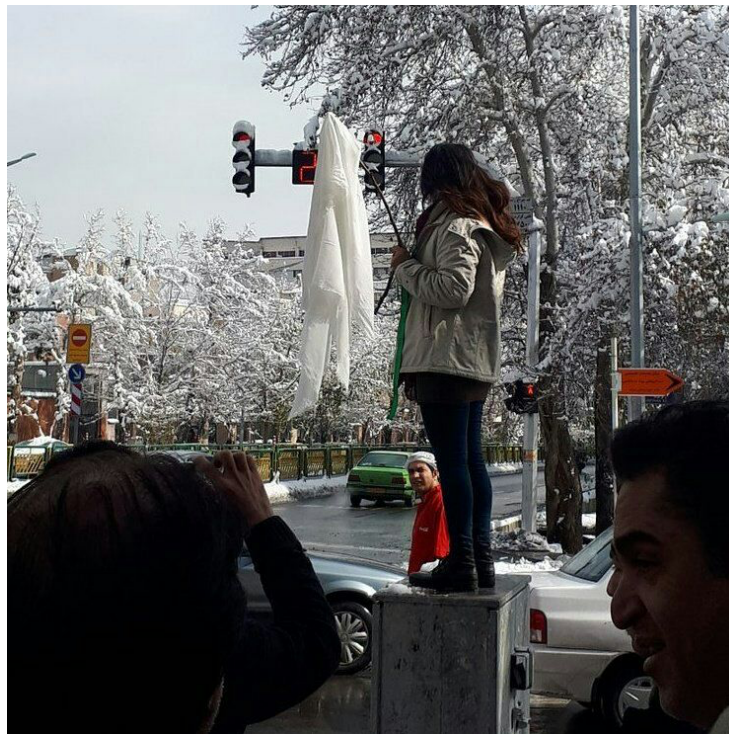


Figure 23: A second woman stands atop the same utility box which was the site of Movahed’s protest a month earlier. Lifting her white headscarf on a stick in a copycat action, she stands quietly as people gather and take pictures ([X.com/Tavaana, 1/29/18](https://twitter.com/Tavaana/status/9876543210)).

Multiple photos from different angles capture the woman standing firm and expressionless as a traffic police officer appears near her ([X.com/Tavaana, 1/29/18](https://twitter.com/Tavaana/status/9876543210)). According to later reports, the woman, identified as Narges Hosseini, was arrested just two minutes into her protest and did

not resist detention (*IranWire* 2022). However, once images of her act spread on social media, they quickly inspired others to follow suit. The same day, at least eight other women (and some men) joined in the protests (Ghajar 2018a). Photos from Tehran, Esfahan, and Mashhad showed women standing atop concrete structures and makeshift platforms, lifting headscarves tied to sticks in a show of solidarity following the latest GRS arrest. In a video shared on Alinejad's Instagram, three women and a man walk down a main street, lifting white headscarves with their backs to the camera (@masih.alinejad 1/29/18). One of the women wears a chador, walking alongside others who are unveiled. The video's sender notes in the caption that one of her friends was detained during the demonstration, taken to a mosque, and interrogated for hours. Another protester, along with a passerby who had been photographing her in a separate demonstration, were also reportedly arrested (Mostaghim and Bengali 2018).

Diversity in Coalition: The Many Faces of Girls of Revolution Street

The video shared on Alinejad's Instagram exemplifies the diversity of participants in GRS protests. As more images emerged of people across Iran lifting headscarves in defiance of compulsory hijab laws throughout February, it became clear that the movement was not limited to just young women resembling the first two Girls of Revolution Street. An *IranWire* article (2018b) makes note of this by highlighting the growing participation of men in the movement, demonstrating in support of women. In the article, one man reflects on his conservative upbringing in explaining the motivations behind his protest, saying that he now sees opposition to gender discrimination as a religious duty – an argument he reinforces by citing scripture (2018b). As seen in several images, he stood on a busy street waving a white headscarf tied to a stick as a result of this belief.

Other images similarly depict men standing along busy streets, atop utility boxes, or other elevated structures across Iran, waving headscarves in defiance of compulsory hijab laws. One widely shared photo also appearing on MSF features a man in a white t-shirt standing on a utility box – similar to the one that sparked the GRS protests – waving a white headscarf, blending into the snowy backdrop (see Figure 5). In a video of the same, the man responds to onlookers questioning his motives by pointing to a woman in the crowd and declaring “I am here because of you. My name is your name,” in demonstrating his support for women’s protests ([X.com/Tavaana](https://twitter.com/Tavaana), [1/30/18](https://twitter.com/Tavaana/status/1013018181818181818)). Another video, shared just before the second wave of GRS protests, shows a man dressed entirely in white expressing his support for White Wednesdays and for his “sister” who had protested for “peace and freedom” on Revolution Street ([StealthyFreedom](https://twitter.com/StealthyFreedom) 1/23/18). Although men had also appeared across MSF, GRS took men’s solidarity with women in a new direction, often showing them protesting compulsory hijab laws alone.



Figure 24: A man stands atop a utility box wearing a white t-shirt and waving a white shawl in Tehran in solidarity with the Girls of Revolution Street ([StealthyFreedom](https://twitter.com/StealthyFreedom) 1/30/18).

Another significant group of participants in GRS were veiled women, many of whom publicly demonstrated against compulsory hijab while remaining conservatively dressed themselves. Several photos and videos, particularly featuring women in traditional chadors, circulated online, documenting their participation in the movement by lifting headscarves atop public platforms. One such recording captures a woman standing in the middle of a busy roundabout in Yazd, draped in a long black chador, waving a white headscarf on a stick as cars pass around her ([X.com/mystealthyorg](https://twitter.com/mystealthyorg), 2/23/18). Similarly, a series of images from the MSF Facebook page (see Figure 6) shows a woman in Mashhad standing atop a utility box, silently raising a black headscarf on a stick amid the surrounding traffic (StealthyFreedom 1/31/18a). As one caption noted, these women were lifting “the flags of Vida and Narges... in being their voices” ([X.com/mystealthyorg](https://twitter.com/mystealthyorg), 2/23/18), demonstrating in support of earlier protesters while asserting their own agency within the movement.



Figure 25: A woman wearing the chador, the long black cloak common in traditional households, stands atop a utility box waving a black scarf in solidarity with GRS, in a busy intersection in the city of Mashhad (StealthyFreedom 1/31/18a).

Elderly women also played a notable role in GRS, with pictures and videos of their participation widely circulated on social media. Their involvement, though often brief and slightly different from the public spectacles common to other GRS protests, attracted significant attention and highlighted the movement's broad appeal across generations. For example, two widely shared photos from January 31st, posted on the MSF Facebook and other social media pages, feature older women raising their headscarves in protest, with the context slightly adapted to their limited capacities for protest. In one image, a woman sitting upright in a bed while connected to a respirator momentarily lifts a headscarf for the camera (StealthyFreedom 1/31/18b). Another video – garnering over 65,000 views on the MSF Facebook page alone to become one of the most viewed and shared posts that day – captures an elderly woman approaching the edge of a park fountain with her cane. She carefully steps onto the ledge, removing her white headscarf which she proceeds to lift into the air using her cane (see Figure 7).



Figure 26: An elderly woman lifts and waves her white headscarf using her cane atop a park fountain in Iran, in support of GRS (StealthyFreedom 1/31/18c).

These posts highlight both the diversity of participants in the GRS protests and the continued centrality of the platform to many of these protests. In her analysis of portraits of political leaders, Acevedo (2013) shows how power and charisma – qualities which leaders seek to emit through symbols, status, poses, etc. – are visually constructed through specific techniques. Worth quoting at length, she explains:

“As Mariana Jenkins has stated in her groundbreaking work on portraiture: ‘[its] primary purpose is not the portrayal of an individual as such, but the evocation through his (sic) image of those abstract principles for which he (sic) stands’ (1947:1). Portraits act as signifiers of the status of the individuals and institutions represented. They convey certain symbols of power and status, expressed through gestures, dress, props, the background, etc., thus they serve a clear political and social function” (Acevedo 2013, 118).

Using the superior position of the protester against people visibly below them, these images thus additionally convey a sense of strength and grandeur. The act of standing above the crowd, raising a headscarf while others look on, visually reinforces a sense of empowerment – a feeling underlying many GRS pictures. Drawing off Butler’s *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) Mona Lilja explains how bodily performativity diverges from linguistic performativity because of the “cultural meaning attached to resisting bodies” (2017, 342). Noting that “resisting bodies and assemblies (often) signify something that is in excess of what is being expressed with words at demonstrations,” Lilja argues for an interpretation of performative actions that captures their material *and* emotional dimensions (2017). In GRS, the body in high places is a central element in its construction of protest. Protesters quite literally stand *above* the law while others look *up* to them – a reversal on MSF where women forged fleeting moments of defiance in public space, often where others were not present.

Men's participation is particularly significant, as it directly challenges the notion that compulsory hijab is solely a "minor" or "women's" issue – points emphasized in statements from officials like Iran's prosecutor-general, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, who dismissed GRS protests as "childish" and "trivial," claiming they were fueled by a small, "ignorant" segment of the population (Wright 2018). Similarly, the involvement of veiled women, including those wearing the full chador, demonstrates that opposition to compulsory hijab is not limited to a specific group but resonates across ideological and social divides.

While images of older women unveiled were also common in MSF, their participation in GRS carried added significance for demonstrating that the movement resonated across generations. This made GRS protests not only striking for reclaiming public space in quite visible ways, but also for expanding the movement's reach. In the video of the elderly woman slowly ascending the platform, there are also striking emotive responses that contribute to these videos' messages. At the beginning, there is an immediate concern that she might slip and fall, followed by relief when she does not. When she finally raises her white headscarf on her cane, the moment evokes a distinct emotional response – one different from the defiant image of a young woman standing motionless in the middle of a busy intersection. In images of elderly women, solidarity also appears more explicitly as something that transcends time and space, connecting to the many images of women protesting mandatory hijab in 1979. Elderly women's participation in GRS pictures does thus not extend from attempts to normalize unveiling, as seen in MSF, but rather serves as declarations of perseverance – attempts to show them as still defiant.

Internal Contradictions and External Manipulation: The Dynamics of Resistance and Repression in GRS

By the first week of February, as GRS gained momentum, authorities had identified and arrested twenty-nine participants of the movement (Rahimpour 2018). In response to the growing wave of protests, the state introduced a series of new punitive measures aimed at suppressing this emerging motif of resistance. Narges Hosseini's bail was set at an unprecedented 500 million tomans (approximately \$135,000 at the time), a stark escalation compared to the fines of 50,000 to 500,000 tomans that Iran's Prosecutor General, Mohammad Jafari, had announced for unveiled women just days earlier on January 31st (*IranWire* 2018a). Jafari further stated that those arrested could face sentences ranging from ten days to two months in detention (2018a). Compared to statements made only a month earlier by Tehran's police chief, Sardan Hossein Rahimi who, to the doubts of many,²⁹ assured the public that the police would turn to a "society-oriented, educational approach," meaning they would "not arrest those who don't respect Islamic values, (but) instead educate them," such statements also exemplified inconsistencies in the state's approach (*AtMigration* 2017).

For example, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Ali Motahari attempted to downplay GRS protests by claiming that hijab is not forcibly imposed in Iran, stating, "In this country, you can dress how you want" – a statement that directly contradicted the arrests of men and women for protesting compulsory hijab over the previous weeks. The statement was later inscribed on the very utility box on Revolution Street where Movahed and Hosseini had staged their protests, shown against the police cars also stationed in front of the box which were also captured in photos,

²⁹ Alinejad addressed the statement in an Instagram post on December 27th and a Facebook post on December 28th, alongside a video of Shima Babei, a participant in MSF who congratulates women on having made enough of an impact with their protests to spark such reactions from authorities (@masih.alinejad, 12/27/17; *StealthyFreedom* 12/28/17).

visualizing contradictions in state policy (StealthyFreedom 1/31/18). By late February, additional pictures showed authorities installing metallic triangular structures over utility boxes around Iran, making them nearly impossible to stand on, as a further deterrent (see Figure 8).



Figure 27: A figure welds a metallic triangular structure to the utility box where Movahed and Hosseini had staged their protests on Revolution Street in preventing further actions ([X.com/Shirafkan82](https://twitter.com/Shirafkan82), 2/22/18).

Beyond exposing internal divisions within the Islamic Republic – where different factions within the government, particularly between Rouhani’s administration and hardliner-controlled institutions, often work against one another – these inconsistencies also highlight a strategic effort to downplay the movement. As demonstrated by the example above, authorities sought to diminish the significance of GRS protests by claiming they were inconsequential, even going so far as to argue that the grievances driving them were unfounded and even trivial. In some instances, they rejected the claims of protesters altogether by suggesting they were intoxicated or under foreign influence. For example, Iran’s First Vice Chief Justice, Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, suggested that women involved in the protests had consumed “illegal substances” while having ties to foreign

organizations, particularly those from Western countries (Ghajar 2018a). However, despite these dismissive claims, the regime's actions often contradicted its rhetoric. Protesters faced a harsh crackdown, including with mass arrests and excessive bail amounts – responses that were entirely inconsistent with the state's own assertions that these were “unimportant” acts.

In response, supporters of GRS often turned state repression into a source of mockery or motivation for further protest. For example, shortly after the Mohseni Ejei's statement, a video posted on the MSF page features a woman recording herself unveiled, casually discussing how she frequently leaves the house without a headscarf. In a pointed jab at the government's claims, she then adds how on this particular morning, she made sure to take a drug test “just to confirm” that she wasn't under the influence of illegal substances before going about her day (StealthyFreedom 2/11/18). Meanwhile, others sought to “re-adapt” their protests around these tactics. In another series of images shared on social media, the utility boxes previously obstructed by government forces were reconstructed using a new platform-like structure, once again making them possible to stand on (see Figure 9). Although I did not come across any images showing new demonstrations as a result of this re-adaptation, the symbolic act of modifying the platform, further amplified through images shared on social media, became a contested exercise in power and agency. Both the state and the movement sought to assert control over this space, each attempting to reclaim it as their own through a continuous cycle of suppression and resistance.



Figure 28: Two photos showing utility boxes around Iran being re-adapted to women's protests with the creation of new platform-like structures places on top of the government-created triangular obstruction, making it easier to stand on once again ([X.com/pouriazeraati](https://x.com/pouriazeraati), 2/25/18).

Perhaps no other example better captures the inconsistency in state response better than the release of a widely discussed government report by President Hassan Rouhani on February 3rd, revealing declining public support for compulsory hijab. The report, published by the Iranian Center for Strategic Studies, a research arm of Rouhani's administration, presented the findings of a nationwide survey on attitudes towards hijab and its enforcement. Notably, the study had been completed in 2014, nearly four years earlier, raising questions about why Rouhani's administration chose to release it amid the GRS protests. Regardless of the timing, one finding however stood out and quickly gained traction across social media: nearly half (49.2%) of Iranians did not believe hijab should be mandatory (*IranWire* 2018b).³⁰

The report not only exemplified the internal divisions within the Iranian regime but also highlighted the unusual nature of such a finding being publicly acknowledged by a state institution.

³⁰ Scholarly reports actually showed the number to be much higher. In one report, results showed that 78.3% of the nearly 15,000 people surveyed across all provinces supported voluntary hijab (*IranWire* 2018b). Nevertheless, the Rouhani report remained significant given its publication by a branch of the Islamic Republic – a regime which has historically rejected the belief that a large segment of the Iranian population favors voluntary hijab.

Alinejad pointed out this contradiction in a post from February 8th on the MSF Facebook page, reminding followers that Rouhani had been one of the key “architects” of public morality laws. She also pointed out his dismissive attitude toward the issue in a 2016 interview, where he laughed off a French reporter’s question about compulsory hijab, responding with the evasive remark that Iran had “bigger issues than the hijab” (StealthyFreedom 2/8/18).

Nevertheless, despite an overt silence on the part of both Rouhani and other sectors of government around the survey, Rouhani’s administration faced significant backlash following its release. In what appeared to be a targeted crackdown, authorities arrested several figures linked to his government. Among them was one of Rouhani’s former campaign managers, accused of “opposing the country’s compulsory hijab rules” (*Center for Human Rights in Iran* 2018). This was followed by the arrests of the editor of a reformist news channel, a reformist political activist, and a former senior Rouhani campaign worker – all detained between late February and March 7th (2018). Reminiscent of the backlash to Mohammad Khatami’s presidential tenure with the stamping out of “civil society” from the public sphere following the election of hardliner president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Rouhani’s efforts to tacitly support GRS were also forcefully rejected by being ousted from the public sphere.

Unlike MSF, which faced a consistently repressive state response, GRS exposed the Iranian regime’s inconsistent and often contradictory reactions which then propelled further resistance. The literature on social media and repression highlights how digital platforms can counteract state crackdowns by alerting users to government attempts to suppress dissent – motivating self-censorship, shifts in the sites of protest, or diversion attempts in evading state repression (Allagui and Kuebler 2011; Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015). However, in the case of GRS,

repression had the opposite effect. Rather than purely diverting backlash, social media allowed protesters to amplify a counter-response mocking the state's attempts to suppress dissent.

Circulating images of slogans scrawled onto reclaimed public objects such as utility boxes or new platforms constructed over the same, turned what would otherwise be seen by a small handful of people into internationally viewed symbolic acts of resistance. In the same way that Narges Hosseini's protest – lasting all of two minutes – triggered an exorbitant bail, demonstrating obvious anxieties on the part of state forces, public shows of dissent – regardless of how quickly they were taken down – did the “work” of activism by fueling online discourses reframing repression as resistance. Government response was not only exposed but *repurposed* as a catalyst for further defiance.

An Expanding Public Coalition: Visualizing Support for Women's Protests

In addition to the diverse groups supporting GRS and the symbolic acts of resistance around the movement, images also visualized shifting public support for women's protests. In many of the pictures and videos shared of women protesting, crowd reactions played an important role in framing the social and political significance of their actions. Similar to MSF where women showed indifference to their being unveiled from passersby, in GRS, images show support for women through clapping, cheering, or disagreement with their treatment, often even interfering in their arrests. These visible displays of support further challenge the state's narrative that opposition to compulsory hijab is limited to a small, radicalized minority. Instead, they highlight a growing public endorsement of women's right to choose the hijab, reinforcing the movement's legitimacy while widening its base of support.

For example, in a video from February 22nd, a crowd reacts with audible shock and disapproval as an officer forcefully pushes a woman off the utility box she had climbed to lift the veil. Gasps and shouts of outrage can be heard as the officer, seemingly unfazed, mocks the bystanders' reactions before moving toward them to disperse the gathering and arrest the woman (StealthyFreedom 2/22/18). The protester, later identified as Maryam Shariatmadari, was arrested and initially taken to a hospital to treat injuries sustained from the fall before being transferred to jail (Shahrabi 2018a). A video still from the moment she was pushed off the platform was circulated online, inspiring a series of memes, art, and graffiti showing her suspended in the air with her ponytail flying behind her (see Figure 10).



Figure 29: On the left, a video still from the moment Maryam Shariatmadari was pushed off the utility box where she was protesting by a police officer (StealthyFreedom 2/23/18). On the right, a utility box spray painted with the #GirlofRevolutionStreet hashtag and a cutout of Shariatmadari being pushed off the box, similar to the viral video still on the left (StealthyFreedom 3/5/18).

In an article covering Shariatmadari's protest and subsequent arrest, an eyewitness told *IranWire* that "the crowd quickly surrounded her (Shariatmadari) and *didn't let the police come close*" (emphasis added). The eyewitness further recounted that bystanders helped Shariatmadari

escape by hailing a taxi for her, even though police officers pursued her after she left the scene – an example of how protesters were actively shielded from arrest through collective intervention (Shahrabi 2018a). Such network interventions were common throughout GRS as reflected in other accounts of bystanders stepping in to protect demonstrators. For instance, in a video from January 30th, a woman protesting in Shiraz describes her experience in a voiceover, emphasizing that although large crowds gathered around her, no one insulted or harassed her; instead, they expressed overwhelming support by clapping and her encouraging her, which eased her fear and gave her the confidence to continue (see Figure 11). As a police car approached and she stepped down to leave, she further notes that bystanders shouted for her to run, assuring her that they would distract the officers in protecting her from arrest.



Figure 30: A video still showing a woman waving her white headscarf atop a platform on a busy street in Shiraz. The woman notes how those recording and gathering around her motivated her to continue protesting by being supportive of her actions (StealthyFreedom 1/30/18).

These examples illustrate how bystanders became active participants in the protests by forming a community of support around women's acts of defiance. Their willingness to intervene reflects the intangible but important connections that motivated their protection of the women. Anthropologists describe these connections as *kinship* – i.e. a “shared substance” that binds individuals through a collective duty to one another (Bauer et al. 2020, 12). Unlike formal relationships, kinship extends to voluntary bonds between people, fostering solidarity even in the absence of institutional ties (Nelson 2013). When applied to digital activism, existing research highlights how social media facilitates the coordination of offline actions (Gerbaudo 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Yet, research has touched little on what generates the sense of commonality and belonging that compels individuals to act on a call. Kinship serves as the “foundation of both cultural identity and resistance,” forging bonds between individuals that mobilize collective action (Sebastian and Giovanangeli 2024). Digital technologies provide “fertile ground for the establishment of kinship bonds,” often building on preexisting social relationships – such as face-to-face interactions – to create new spaces of shared identity and solidarity online (Wade 2019).

In her study of digital kinship cultures among Black teenage girls on social media, Wade (2019) illustrates how these users, acutely aware of the surveillance capacities of digital platforms, actively protect one another's identities. Their solidarity is shaped by existing on and offline relationships, which are further reinforced in digital spaces. Similarly, Norman (2024) explores how “platform kinships” can transcend national and cultural boundaries by connecting individuals across geographic divides. Through platforms like WhatsApp, Norman demonstrates how digital communication reshapes traditional kinship structures, adapting them to new modes of interaction and support. Visual media is often an important aspect of this process, expressing kinship by becoming representative of these interpersonal bonds (Cati 2020).

In her analysis of GRS, Khosravi Ooryad (2020) argues that such linkages appear across the movement through the creation of cultural alliances that connect past and present women's struggles. Using songs (an aspect of GRS I discuss further below), she shows how women "engage in the shared cultural memory of resistance against inequalities" – highlighting the connections of solidarity between them (Khosravi Ooryad 2020, 131). I add to this theorization by demonstrating the central importance of social media images to the process, expressing kinship between women and the broader community supporting their protests. While the physical acts of protest thus lasted only minutes, their impact – capturing women openly defying compulsory hijab laws and visualizing widespread solidarity with them – was far more enduring. Whether through crowds expressing outrage as police forcibly removed women or through cheers and encouragement directed at protesters, these responses reinforced women's belonging within a defiant community. Protest actions spread not just through direct participation but through a form of collective engagement with individual acts of defiance – either signaling deeper political and cultural shifts or a willingness to be more open about previously "falsified" preferences (Kuran 1991).

One example of this emerging community in texts is reflected in posts tagged with the #If_I_Were_There (اگر_آنجا_باشم) hashtag. One day after Maryam Shariatmadari's violent arrest after being pushed off a utility box, users expressed their solidarity by imagining how they would have intervened had they been present. The hashtag became a space for expressing collective outrage, support for detained women, and strategic discussions on how to protect protesters in future demonstrations. For instance, one user suggested distracting police by making fake emergency calls, reporting a robbery or a fight elsewhere to "disarm the police in a lawful way" ([X.com/heamiri](https://x.com/heamiri), 2/23/18). Others pledged to climb the utility box in place of the detained woman

([X.com/salehpirouzi, 2/23/18](#); [X.com/ShekarrPanirrr, 2/23/18](#)), while another user vowed to chant “Let her go! Let her go!” in refusing to “remain silent” ([X.com/AmirMohsenM, 2/23/18](#)).

These posts illustrate how users sought to integrate themselves into the movement, aligning their actions – real or imagined – with the women protesting on the streets. During demonstrations, eyewitness accounts, images, and news reports captured bystanders physically intervening in arrests, surrounding women to shield them, or vocally condemning police violence. Textual narratives extended these efforts, reinforcing solidarity by envisioning support for those protesting. Both physical and digital participation stemmed from the kinship ties forged within the movement, cultivating a broader community dedicated to women’s rights, freedom of choice, and bodily autonomy.

Putting Emerging Network Variables to the Test with International Women’s Day

By the end of February, the waves of protests and arrests surrounding GRS had drawn increased public attention to the movement, setting the stage for a more coordinated push for mass resistance on International Women’s Day on March 8th. While MSF had previously attempted to mobilize around this day by sharing video clips from women’s protests in 1979, or videos and captions from Alinejad and other women mentioning the historical importance of the day, engagement had remained limited to just a handful of posts.³¹ In contrast, 2018 saw a significant shift, with MSF sharing dozens of pictures and videos explicitly referencing International Women’s Day, linking it to ongoing protests, and encouraging actions around it. The momentum generated by GRS had transformed March 8th into a strategic opportunity to further mobilize

³¹ In 2016, the MSF Facebook showed a video of a woman holding a placard calling for equality between men and women in conjunction with International Women’s Day on March 8th (StealthyFreedom 3/8/16). In 2017, the MSF page similarly shared a photo compilation by an Iranian artist for March 8th and a subsequent video compilation mixing clips from the 1979 March 8th protests with those of MSF throughout the years (StealthyFreedom 3/9/2016).

around women’s demands – a point reiterated with social media posts and activist statements motivating those in Iran to “take to the streets” in “practicing civil disobedience to... the mandatory hijab” (@masih.alinejad 2/28/18).

It was with this momentum in the background that Alinejad first issued the call to action on February 28th, using the hashtag #March8_Iran (#هشتت_مارس_ايران). In the post, she calls on women “around the country” to amplify their demands and “show their defiance to this harmful law,” signaling a more coordinated effort against compulsory hijab (@masih.alinejad 2/28/18). Social media users responded by tagging the hashtag in their posts across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Many of these posts were later shared by Alinejad and the MSF page, featuring women publicly protesting by lifting their headscarves atop elevated platforms in the lead-up to March 8th.

From March 7-8 alone, 15 posts on Alinejad’s and MSF’s Twitter, 23 posts on the MSF Facebook, and 12 posts on Alinejad’s Instagram included information, statements, or pictures and videos related to International Women’s Day. In one post from March 7th, a video compilation of women walking unveiled around Iran is set against clips from the International Women’s Day protests in 1979, including a statement that “tomorrow, we meet (again) for #March8_Iran” (StealthyFreedom 3/7/18). As both inspiration and historical continuity between past and present movements, the compilation appears alongside other posts showing women lifting headscarves in solidarity with GRS both in Iran and around the world.³²

³² Throughout GRS, the MSF page shared pictures of people holding white headscarves in solidarity with GRS from Armenia, Canada, Croatia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States, among other countries. In a post from March 7th, MSF shared a picture of a poster in Turkish captioned “Turkish women are organizing a massive rally in Istanbul's Taksim Square,” showing how those around the world were also demonstrating against compulsory hijab with women in Iran (StealthyFreedom 3/7/18b). In an earlier post from March 3rd, Alinejad shares that “women around the globe are sending us their pictures of support for Iranian women

Other pages amplified pictures of women’s public protests alongside other types of content. For instance, a widely shared photo from March 7th shows a large banner draped over a highway overpass in Iran, featuring the feminist fist within the Venus symbol – a visible marker of resistance signaling the momentum building around International Women’s Day (see Figure 12). Another post promoted a planned “tweet storm” on March 8th to express solidarity with those protesting in the streets ([X.com/anonymous_patch](https://x.com/anonymous_patch), 3/7/18).

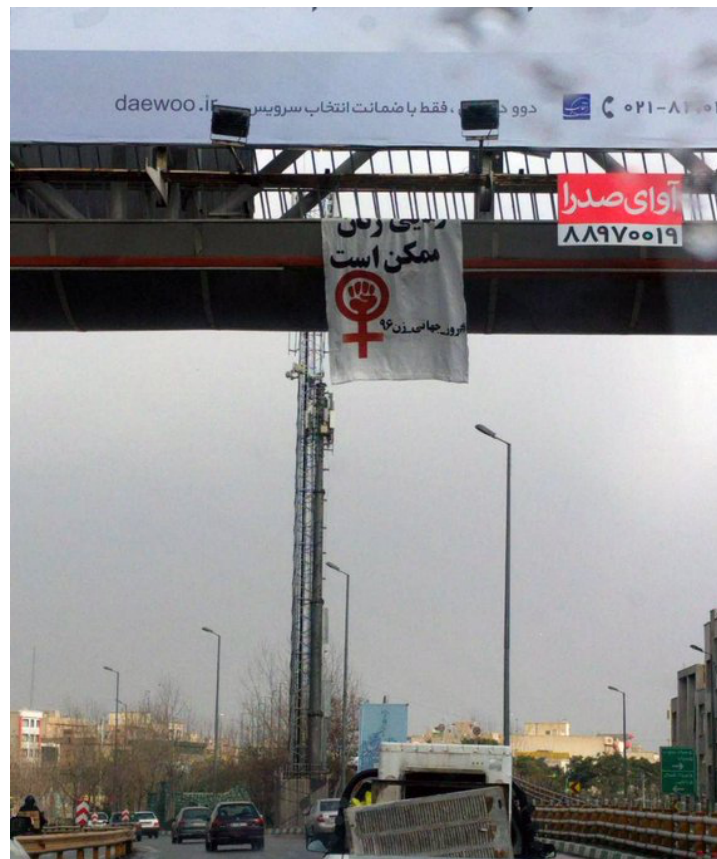


Figure 31: A banner hanging over a highway in Iran with the feminist fist in Venus sign reading “Women’s Freedom is Possible.” in anticipation of International Women’s Day on March 8th ([X.com/ZananKhiaban](https://x.com/ZananKhiaban), 3/7/18).

as part of #March8_Iran” with pictures of several women waving shawls in front of their university in Yerevan (StealthyFreedom 3/3/18). Given the “international” nature of the MSF Facebook with posts and captions often translated into English, Alinejad thus often called on foreign supporters to send content directly – for example, in a post from February 28th, she calls on her followers to “support Iranian women’s heroic struggle against compulsory veil internationally,” going on to announce that, “wherever in the world you are, you can support us by attending women’s day rallies by waving a white shawl on a stick.” (StealthyFreedom 2/28/18). These are calls that several posts shared on the MSF page around the March 8th protests responded to.

While current platform structures inhibit comprehensive retroactive searches, thus making it difficult to know the exact number of posts shared around the March 8th campaign, it is clear that efforts were widespread and extended beyond just sharing images of women's protests to encompass both online and offline actions. For example, there is evidence of a separate Telegram channel called "Eight_March" which shared information on protests planned in front of the Ministry of Labor and Welfare. This later manifested in a short video clip cross-shared on the Vahid Online Telegram page showing a large group of women gathered in front of the Ministry, some of them wearing white headscarves, while holding paper signs articulating demands for women's equality while singing songs about freedom ([T.me/VahidOnline](https://t.me/VahidOnline), 3/8/18). In the same post, screenshots from several tweets discuss not having been able to access the site due to the number of security forces blocking entry ahead of the event (3/8/18). It was later shared that the gathering was violently dispersed before it even had a chance to take off, with over eighty of those attending arrested as a result (Shahrabi 2018c).

One of the most widely shared posts from March 8th features a video of three women performing as a part of the campaign aboard a Tehran metro car. Singing the "Song of Equality" – a well-known feminist anthem that first emerged during the One Million Signatures Campaign as a collaboration among prominent feminists (Khosravi Ooryad 2020) – they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, their headscarves draped loosely over their shoulders, holding up images of women from the 1979 protests (see Figure 13). As they conclude their performance, one of the women addresses the passengers, stating, "Today is International Women's Day. For 110 years, March 8th has been International Women's Day," before dedicating the moment to all those who "have resisted all forms of oppression, violence, and degradation throughout their lives." ([X.com/Vahid](https://x.com/Vahid), 3/8/18).



Figure 32: A video still from three women singing “Song of Equality” aboard the Tehran metro in honor of International Women’s Day on March 8, 2018 ([X.com/Vahid](https://x.com/Vahid), 3/8/18).

In the video, several passengers smile warmly as they watch the women perform. A vendor moving between metro cars pauses behind them, momentarily blocked from passing, but eventually stops to observe with a smile. After the song ends and the women read their statement for International Women’s Day, they begin handing out small slips of paper to fellow passengers. The short, one-minute and twenty-five-second clip concludes with the women wishing everyone a “Happy Women’s Day.” Many passengers echo the greeting, while one adds, “Please take care of yourselves,” a remark that likely acknowledges the risks associated with such public acts of defiance.

This example encapsulates several defining aspects of GRS. It reflects a deliberate attempt to foster solidarity among female passengers, many of whom subtly affirm their support for the women through nods of approval and participation. It also highlights a direct and highly visible act of protest, as women unveil, sing, and hold up images of the 1979 women’s march, creating historical continuity with past protests. Unlike the fleeting acts of defiance characteristic of MSF—which often operated within and against the state’s surveillance apparatus—these women *want to*

be seen. Just as the utility boxes in GRS physically elevate protesters, making them hyper-visible, these performances rely on documentation and dissemination via social media to extend their impact beyond the confines of the metro cart. By transforming everyday spaces into spaces of protest, GRS emphasized overt, collective demonstrations of defiance – an approach that is particularly visible in this moment of metro solidarity.

Like MSF’s attempts to envision an alternative world through practices of joy and normalization, these examples illustrate how prefiguration emerges through the very acts of solidarity the women engage in at that moment. The temporal aspect of MSF which connects present to future moments of liberation thus becomes tightened in GRS to actively create that future now within the confines of the metro cart. Dedicating their song to women, clapping for them, and expressing compassion for the struggles they have endured similarly engages practices of alternative world-making but removes the “hope” underlying practices of resistance in MSF, making this an act of liberation for the present moment. These attempts are solidified in the song itself. I have translated from Bianet (2018) a few lines of the lyrics, showing how they connect to this particular act:

I will blossom from the scars on my skin;

that exist as a sentence just because I am a woman, a woman, a woman

If we join voices, stand together, and remain hand-in-hand, we will be free from repression.

We will create a new world, an equal world, in solidarity and sisterhood

A joyful and better world

Post International Women’s Day, the Dissipation of GRS, and Broader Impacts of the Movement on State-Society Dynamics

The International Women’s Day protests largely ended without any major upheavals. Images showing demonstrations of solidarity circulated over the following days and weeks, but by

the end of March, the momentum surrounding the movement had largely subsided. Nevertheless, GRS achieved something MSF had not: it brought women's grievances into the public sphere in an undeniably visible way, compelling the state to respond at a level matching the escalation of women's protests. For example, on March 8th, in a speech to clerics and religious scholars, Ayatollah Khamenei directly addressed GRS, signaling a notable shift in the regime's response to women's activism. Explicitly referencing Alinejad's role in mobilizing protests, he claimed that "they (the West/those in the West) spend a lot of money... to impact the independent identity of the Muslim women" (Khamenei.Ir 2018). He further elaborated by stating:

"Despite all the funds, energy and thoughts behind this plot, their efforts are futile. The mere result of their work might be a few girls, here or there who are deceived, or for various motivations take off their headscarves. All of their efforts have minor effects, which are unimportant. What makes me sensitive, is when an elite group talk of "compulsory hijab." (Khamenei.Ir 2018).

For a state which had largely downplayed the significance of these protests, this marked a notable shift in response. An *IranWire* article further highlights this new approach by highlighting the evolving charges against activists. The fourteen individuals arrested during the Ministry of Labor protests were charged with political crimes such as "acting against national security" (Shahrabi 2018c). While earlier arrests of women protesters had often been framed as moral offenses, such as "prostitution," later detentions reflected a harsher crackdown, reclassifying women's defiance as a direct political threat to the state (2018c).

This shift was followed two weeks later by one of the most explicit and violent threats against Alinejad to date. Hamid Reza Ahmadabadi, a prominent member of the Basij, allegedly sent a series of messages offering a bounty of 24-karat gold equal to the weight of Alinejad's tongue to anyone who would "cut her tongue and bring it to me" as punishment for her role in

women's protests (Shahrabi 2018b). Even Alinejad, who had long been accustomed to threats, admitted that while such intimidation tactics usually made her "afraid," this time she was left "cringing" in shock at "how someone can so easily write about slaughtering human beings" (2018b).

Despite such growing threats and the eventual decline of the movement, GRS had a lasting impact on subsequent women's mobilizations. Most notably, it introduced and reinforced a crucial element that had only been nascent in MSF: coalition-building. While MSF had previously incorporated elements of collective action – particularly with the White Wednesdays campaign – GRS marked a turning point in the movement's strategic engagement with public space. It propelled MSF beyond individual acts of defiance toward a more coordinated and overtly confrontational form of resistance.

For example, on March 13th – in the wake of GRS's March 8th demonstrations, the MSF page announced the launch of the "Walking Unveiled" campaign – an extension of White Wednesdays that encouraged women to document themselves walking unveiled in public spaces throughout Iran (StealthyFreedom 3/13/18). This campaign emerged organically, reflecting the evolving nature of women's protests post-GRS. It signaled a shift toward increasingly public, direct, and highly visible forms of resistance, propelling MSF efforts to "reclaim" public space on a much larger scale.

A movement requires more than just access to public space – it also needs resources, and this is where GRS's network structure played a crucial role. GRS cultivated a key resource: public support for women's demands, signaling a broader shift in perceptions of compulsory hijab, the state, and its moral authority. This shift may explain why, a year later, a new video on the MSF page featuring Yasaman Aryani handing out flowers on the Tehran metro – alongside her mother

and another woman in honor of International Women's Day – gained widespread attention (StealthyFreedom 3/8/19). The act mirrored the previous year's performance of three women singing on the Tehran metro, reinforcing a recurring motif of women participating in public performances of dissent.

GRS-style protests also resurfaced on the one-year anniversary of the March 8th mobilization. In one widely shared video, a man waving a white headscarf on a stick stands elevated above a growing crowd, until a security officer confronts him and urges him to come down (StealthyFreedom 3/11/19). After repeated demands from the officer, another man reaches up and pulls down his headscarf. In response, the protester drops his stick, raises his arms, and defiantly shouts, "No to Compulsory Hijab," drawing cheers and whistles from the crowd before stepping down (see Figure 14). Another picture showed two women holding a sign while unveiled on a busy public street, drawing attention to International Women's Day once again (StealthyFreedom 3/8/19b). By embedding themselves within coordinated campaigns like White Wednesdays, My Camera Is My Weapon, and Girls of Revolution Street, these acts of defiance emphasized high visibility and collective solidarity, reinforcing the growing public momentum behind women's protests.



Figure 33: A man (left) waves a white headscarf in protest of compulsory hijab atop a platform, with a crowd of people around him, while a police officer (right) pleads for him to come down (StealthyFreedom 3/11/19).

As with the previous year, this renewed wave of women’s protests signaled an escalating challenge to the regime, prompting an even harsher crackdown. The women distributing flowers on the metro were swiftly arrested and given severe prison sentences. One report states that Yasaman Aryani and her mother each received sixteen-year sentences for their participation (*Center for Human Rights in Iran* 2019). The third woman accompanying them, Mozghan Keshavarz, was also handed a twenty-three-prison sentence comprised of 10 years for “encouraging people to corruption and prostitution,” five years for “assembly and collusion against national security,” one year for “propaganda against the state” and 7.6 years for “insulting the sacred” (2019). The same report further notes that since January 2018, at least twelve individuals arrested for protesting compulsory hijab had been sentenced to prison terms ranging from six months to thirty-three years (2019). These penalties underscore the regime’s recognition of the protests’ potential to escalate, making them a persistent point of contention even a year later.

Conclusion

Emerging at a particularly pivotal moment – at the height of White Wednesdays and just days before the outbreak of the Dey Protests – it was inevitable that GRS would capture the attention of both the Iranian public and the regime. However, GRS also signaled a new phase in women’s protests, standing out for its clear escalation of demands for gender equality. While MSF had focused on fleeting acts of defiance dispersed across public spaces in a decentralized takeover, GRS was defined by highly visible, bold acts of resistance that were not necessarily staged for the camera. The very spectacle of these protests commanded attention, both in real time and in their digital afterlives, as images of the moment spread across social media.

These acts of protest derived their power from their heightened visibility and direct confrontation, unfolding against a backdrop of increased authoritarian backlash. The centrality of the utility box in these demonstrations made it clear that GRS protesters intended to be seen. While MSF often sought to evade state surveillance, GRS embraced it - fully aware that these acts would draw the attention of authorities. In doing so, protesters forced the regime’s response into their protest. Arrests, detainments, and violent crackdowns only further elevated the status of the movement in the public eye and motivated more people to join demonstrations.

At the same time, the state’s response revealed fissures in the regime structure and growing inconsistencies in state practice – demonstrating its own inefficacy even as it moved swiftly to suppress the movement. On one hand, officials sought to downplay the protests as insignificant; on the other, they escalated repression through mass arrests and violent crackdowns. In both cases, the regime’s actions became entangled in GRS itself, inadvertently fueling new waves of resistance. Some of this resistance unfolded in the very spaces the state dismissed as unimportant yet felt compelled to control. When authorities attempted to reclaim utility boxes that had become

symbolic platforms for dissent, GRS supporters seized the opportunity to construct a new platform directly atop them. This act exemplified how the state was increasingly losing control since each attempt at suppression only ignited new creative expressions of defiance.

Ultimately, GRS served as a critical bridge between MSF and Woman, Life, Freedom, as I will discuss in the following chapter. GRS both escalated women's demands and influenced the trajectory of MSF, pushing it toward a more confrontational approach to gender discrimination. In its aftermath, MSF increasingly incorporated public visibility into visual content, with women walking unveiled and capturing passersby reactions to emphasize the normalcy of their actions, becoming more prevalent. This shift shows the centrality of coalition-building to both movements. GRS visualized a broad network of solidarity through its diverse participants, willful crowds, and vocal sympathizers, while MSF, in turn, evolved within the same framework to innovate new ways of resisting gender discriminatory laws.

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CHAPTER 6: THE RE-ORIENTATION OF THE DISSENTING BODY TO SPACE IN WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM

Introduction

On September 14, 2022, reports circulated on social media that a young woman had been hospitalized in a coma after suffering repeated “hits to the head” while in the custody of Iran’s morality police (@1500Tasvir). Days shy of her twenty-third birthday, Jina Amini had been on vacation in Tehran with her family from Saqqez, in Kurdistan province, when she was stopped in the street alongside her brother for being poorly veiled. She was taken to a “re-education police station” for further action where an eyewitness observed Amini collapse, at which point she was transferred to the closest hospital, Kasra Hospital, by the authorities for treatment (Shahrabi 2022). Less than forty-eight hours after arriving at the hospital, Jina was pronounced dead. The social media posts that had initially drawn attention to her case circulated once again, bearing the hashtag #MahsaAmini (##مهسا_امینی) – a reference to Jina’s official “state name”³³ – while accompanied by scornful, anti-regime messages. They emerged alongside new posts showing sporadic protests against state-sponsored gender-based violence, marking the early stages of what would soon escalate into one of the largest and most prolonged revolutionary uprisings in Iran since the Green Movement.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF) movement, getting its name from the Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*, which was a central chant of protests, was the first to make women’s rights both the catalyst and central demand of a mass uprising in Iran. The reasons surrounding Amini’s death made gender a central aspect of the movement from the start, infusing into the many protests,

³³ Ethnic minorities are often prevented from using their names, forcing them to adopt Iranian or Islamic names for official state documentation, while preserving their ethnic names for home and local use.

campaigns, strikes, spontaneous destructions, everyday resistance, and international acts of solidarity that came to comprise the movement over time. As with My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) and Girls of Revolution Street (GRS), WLF drew from a diverse repertoire of contention, through which dancing became just as much an act of protest as burning down government buildings. Women walking the streets unveiled occurred alongside business owners staging mass strikes in solidarity with the movement.

As Tarrow and Tilly (2015) suggest, such diverse tactics – often adapted from past protests – are what transform a movement with a clear start and end point into an “episode of contention,” capturing its evolution in response to new actors, environments, and grievances. Comparing the abolitionist struggle in England to the Ukrainian Civil War, they infer:

“In both, actors made claims on authorities, used public performances to do so, drew on inherited forms of collective action (our term for this is repertoires) and invented new ones, forged alliances with influential members of their respective polities, took advantage of existing political regime opportunities and made new one, and used a combination of institutional and extrainstitutional routines to advance their claims” (Tarrow and Tilly 2015, 7).

In this way, WLF emerged from a broader tradition of contention around gender-based oppression that had taken shape over the previous decade. Jina’s death served as a critical juncture – an “opportunity” for past repertoires to resurface, not only because they were familiar to Iranians but also because they represented the cumulative efforts of earlier movements that had laid the groundwork for new strategies to take hold. Kinship and coalition-building, staged protests, and spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity (core to both MSF and GRS), provided the foundation for an even more confrontational movement. However, it was the convergence of longstanding grievances, the injustice surrounding Jina’s death, and the regime’s brutal crackdown that transformed these acts into something far more expansive. WLF rapidly escalated upon the public

sphere, as motivated by feelings of rage that took state-society dynamics into multiple, unpredictable directions, while adding a crucial new dimension to the configuration: a re-orientation of the dissenting body to space.

In WLF, *all acts became defiant long enough to become ordinary*. Once isolated acts of gender resistance merged with a mass movement – making it a lethal combination for a state whose entire architecture is built on women’s mass compliance – fear no longer determined women’s relationship with public space. The alternative world which MSF and GRS had imagined through tactics of normalization and kinship manifested In WLF as already having taken place. The camera merely documented a new moral order where an alternative authority determined spatial usage, bodily presentations, and social relations.

Nevertheless, this alternative moral order relied on being *seen*. New acts proliferated around a set of embodied, symbolic, and artistic motifs of resistance, at each point mediating the relationship with regime authorities over the same elements crucial to their attempts at maintaining, or re-taking, control of the public sphere. For example, as I will show below, once renditions of feminist rage appeared in how women burned their headscarves or destroyed regime propaganda – recreating the relationships around women’s bodies which have long guided their movement through space – authorities responded with a set of aggressive tactics seeking to *remove* these dissenting bodies altogether. In each case, seeing the body openly defying the regime’s gender order is what gave WLF its power, and the regime, its most significant existential challenge. Even as authorities responded aggressively in suppressing further demonstrations of dissent, those same tactics often sparked new renditions of protest, signaling a new public authority which made the state even more erratic in its attempts to take back power.

Jina's Death as a Critical Juncture: The Formation of a "Visual Injustice Symbol" and the Eruption of a Mass Movement

On September 14 and 15, news of Jina Amini's hospitalization rapidly spread online, accompanied by images of her both before and after her arrest, despite concerted efforts by state authorities to suppress information about the circumstances surrounding her detention. According to an eyewitness who had been detained alongside Amini, authorities swiftly confiscated all detainees' phones after she collapsed, ensuring that no images or footage of the incident could be recorded (Shahrabi 2022). The eyewitness further recalled that "They (authorities) were so preoccupied with pictures and videos that they forgot we had asked our families to bring us clothes. They'd taken delivery of the clothes but had not given them to us," demonstrating how authorities were more concerned with preventing word of the incident from getting out than they were with their supposed mission of "re-educating" detainees on proper dress (2022).

A journalist working for the reformist newspaper *Shargh* was among the first to report on Amini's case, publishing the story alongside several images: one showing Amini lying unconscious in a hospital bed with tubes running through her nose and mouth, and another capturing her grief-stricken parents clinging to each other in the hospital corridor as they awaited news of their daughter's condition (Motamedi 2023a) (see Figure 1). These images traversed social media sites such as Twitter (now X) and Instagram, where users expressed grief, outrage, and disbelief over Amini's situation. Some posts drew direct comparisons between Amini and past victims of state violence, juxtaposing her image with that of Neda Agha-Soltan, whose killing during the 2009 Green Movement protests became a symbol of government repression ([X.com/ali_winter_18](https://x.com/ali_winter_18), 9/15/22). Others turned their attention to the morality police, placing images of Iranian patrols alongside the now-infamous photograph of a Minneapolis police officer

kneeling on George Floyd's neck, drawing parallels between state repression in Iran and police brutality in other countries ([X.com/Far_naz64](https://twitter.com/Far_naz64),9/15/22).



Figure 34: Left, Jina Amini lies unconscious in a hospital bed after being detained by the morality police ([X.com/shimababaeii](https://twitter.com/shimababaeii), 9/15/22). Right, Jina's parents hold each other in the hospital walkway where she was taken, awaiting updates on her condition ([X.com/Rezahakbari](https://twitter.com/Rezahakbari), 9/16/22).

These images were often set against others of Amini before her death, depicting her as a vibrant young woman, living a normal twenty-something life by taking selfies and practicing hobbies. For example, one now-iconic image captures her side profile, offering a soft smile as she lightly grasps the edge of her headscarf, her braided hair visibly peeking out – an aesthetic common to young women of her generation ([X.com/ICHRI](https://twitter.com/ICHRI), 9/15/2022). Another widely shared video showed a highly stylized Amini blowing on a dandelion as its seeds scattering in the wind (Figure 2), while another captured the final hours before her arrest on what appears to be a Tehran metro train, wearing a manteau and a loosely draped headscarf, smiling at the camera (@1500Tasvir, 9/15/22a). Over the following days, more personal snapshots of Amini emerged, showing her singing, smiling, and posing in front of a birthday cake ([X.com/AdrienneMahsa](https://twitter.com/AdrienneMahsa), 9/21/22). One

often-shared video showed her joyfully dancing in traditional Kurdish attire, smiling as she waved a white cloth – an essential gesture in many Kurdish folk dances (see Figure 2).



Figure 35: Left, Jina Amini blows a dandelion as its seeds scatter in the air ([X.com/Victorious_20](https://twitter.com/Victorious_20), 9/15/22). Right, a video still from Amini dancing in traditional Kurdish clothing ([X.com/KhosroIsfahani](https://twitter.com/KhosroIsfahani), 9/19/22).

Thomas Olesen (2015) argues that the juxtaposition of pre- and post-mortem, or post-torture, images plays a crucial role in narrative building, connecting the issues at the heart of a premature death to broader cultural, social, and economic grievances. Using the example of Khaled Said, whose disfigured body following brutal treatment by Egyptian police was captured and widely circulated online, Olesen (2013) illustrates how these images spoke to widespread frustrations with police brutality, corruption, and state repression in Egyptian society. Said's portrayal as a young, educated man who fell victim to the very abuses that defined Mubarak's rule resonated with many Egyptians struggling under systemic injustices, offering a rhetorical cue for mass mobilization (2013).

A similar dynamic unfolded in Iran with the case of Neda Agha-Soltan, whose final moments were captured on video and widely disseminated online (Chapter 2). The images that documented her violent death at the hands of state forces contrasted against past-life images of her smiling, hiking, and posing with her boyfriend, exemplifying a case of “digitally mediated martyrdom” (Mortensen 2011; Lewis 2019). Through moral shocks and visual and discursive symbols connecting the victims’ deaths to a broader, preexisting struggle, these images “universalized” the claims of mistreatment (Jasper 2008; Olesen 2014). They enacted “visual injustice symbols” that infused with the collective consciousness of those viewing the images, motivating actions around them (Olesen 2015).

In Amini’s case, past-life images set against those of her lying unconscious in a hospital similarly humanized her story, framing her as an ordinary young woman whose life was unjustly cut short. Images of Amini smiling, laughing, and enjoying life before her death symbolized the profound loss of innocence and future potential, infusing with narratives describing her as an active swim coach, deeply passionate about her studies, and eager to start university in the coming months with dreams of becoming a doctor, reinforcing her death as cruel and unjust (Alavi 2023). These representations additionally connected to a broader history of state-sponsored violence against women – recent examples of which shaped global reception to Amini’s case.

For instance, just three months before Amini’s death, another woman’s images had circulated widely on social media in evoking public outrage, drawing parallels to Amini’s case. In July 2022, Sepideh Rashnu filmed an altercation on a Tehran bus, where a chador-clad woman harassed her for not wearing a proper hijab. The footage, first shared on the 1500Tasvir Twitter (now X), captured the growing confrontation as other women rallied to support Rashnu by covering the chador-clad woman’s camera lens (who had begun filming in retaliation), before

kicking her off the bus (Isfahani 2024). Days later, state television aired new images of Rashnu following her arrest, showing her pale, hollow-eyed, and visibly subdued as she recanted her statements in what was widely believed to be a forced confession.³⁴ These images starkly contrasted to earlier photos of Rashnu smiling and unveiled, reinforcing the violence that plays out on women's bodies at the hands of the state.

Rashnu's name often appeared alongside Amini's following her death, connecting to past examples of gender injustice pervading the Iranian consciousness. For example, in one post, a user openly suggests that "Sepideh Rahnu's tortured face made the murder of #MahsaAmini unbearable, leading to the beginning of the uprising" ([X.com/farangissbayat](https://x.com/farangissbayat), 10/6/22). This helped Amini's case resonate with the Iranian public, constructing a narrative around state violence, death, torture, and the loss of innocence and joy visualized through past and post-incident images. Unlike Rashnu's case, however, this time the outrage resulting from these visual and discursive framings did not remain confined to online spaces; it ignited a more direct, physical response in the streets.

Kasra Hospital, Jina's Funeral, and the Eruption of Uncontrolled Rage

On the night of Jina's death, small demonstrations were held in and around Argentina Square, the square housing Kasra Hospital where Amini had been treated, with protesters seen marching and chanting "Death to Khamenei" and "Death to the Oppressor." As night fell, videos showed the crowds swelling, with demonstrators clapping and shouting "*Bisharaf!*" (dishonorable or unethical) outside the hospital (@1500Tasvir, 9/16/22a). Dozens of security forces, including many women clad in long black chadors, were seen dispersed throughout the square, in a preemptive show of force (@1500Tasvir, 9/16/22b). As one protester recalled after spontaneously

³⁴ Rashnu has since shared further details of her detainment and forced confession here: <https://x.com/AlinejadMasih/status/1907124737672667318>.

attending the demonstrations, dressed in black as a symbol of mourning and hoping others would join her, upon arriving she quickly noticed the female agents in a sight she describes as “truly nauseating” (*IranWire* 2022b). Wearing full chadors and face masks as they waited to disperse potential protesters, they were undertaking measures to “escape recognition and accountability” in case they were filmed (2022b). Another eyewitness notes that authorities had even blocked the roads leading up to the hospital in an effort to suppress demonstrations (Jabbari, 2022). Nevertheless, small groups of people gathered in protest and those who could not reach the square resorted to honking their horns from their cars as an alternative demonstration of support (2022).

The following day, Amini’s body was transported back to Saqqez for burial, where thousands of mourners gathered to pay their respects. Videos from the funeral depicted an ocean of people surrounding Amini’s grave and dozens of security forces surrounding them (@1500Tasvir, 9/17/22a). At one point, a local Kurdish labor activist addressed the crowd, shouting, “This could have been my daughter! This could have been my sister! This could have been your daughter!” – a recurring theme tying Amini’s fate to a long history of violence against women in Iran (Pourostad, Keramati, and Furlong 2023). The crowd responded with chants of “A martyr never dies!” before security forces began turning on the mourners.

Subsequent videos captured attendees fleeing amid the sound of gunfire, with some images showing wounded protesters – one visibly bloodied and lying on the ground (@1500Tasvir, 9/17/22a). Others, however, showed emerging signs of collective resistance and outrage with mourners captured hurling rocks at a massive banner bearing Khamenei’s image, visibly defacing it (@1500Tasvir, 9/17/22b). Another one of the most widely shared videos from that day similarly showed crowds of women waving their headscarves in the air as claps, cheers, and chants of “Death to the Dictator” filled the background ([X.com/AlinejadMasih](https://x.com/AlinejadMasih), 9/17/22).

Of the 3,203 pictures and videos I analyzed from the 1500Tasvir Instagram page between September 14, 2022, and December 31, 2022, 921 depicted protests alone. These videos captured large assemblies in public spaces where people marched, clapped, cheered, or chanted, often drawing on past protest traditions to frame their demands and give identity to the movement.³⁵ Connecting to the framing of Amini’s death, the scale and persistence of these protests were, in part, fueled by the profound sense of injustice and outrage evoked by the circulating images – emotions that translated into offline action against the regime. As Paulo Gerbaudo argues, one of social media’s most powerful functions is its ability to facilitate people’s “coming together in public space” (2012, 12). Digital platforms enable what he terms a “choreography of assembly” which “direct(s) people towards specific protest events... provides participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act... (and) contributes to the “*construction of an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in public space*” (my own emphasis added, 12).

In WLF, the moral shock triggered by Amini’s death – further amplified by the state’s violent crackdown on mourners at her funeral – transformed online expressions of grief and rage into real-world action. As a result, protesters made the destruction of propaganda, state buildings, and symbols of government rule a central feature of the uprising. These symbolic attacks became inserted into the battle to reclaim public space by erasing, destroying, and dismantling the visual and material markers of the regime’s dominance. However, unlike MSF and GRS where this public

³⁵ For example, the many iterations of “Death to...” have appeared across other movements, including the Dey Protests in 2018. These chants repurpose the regime’s use of “Death to America” which emerged concomitantly with the 1979 Revolution, capturing the turning away from the Shah’s policies of rapprochement with the West. Other chants such as “I will kill whoever killed my sister” similarly included expressively violent language recreated around the gendered component of the moment, drawing from past protests where “I will kill whoever killed my brother was a common chant” (*IranWire* 2022a).

encroachment occurred piecemeal, in WLF, expressions of rage motivated a sweeping escalation of the takeover of public space.

For example, one manifestation of this rapid escalation of rage appeared in videos of protesters setting fire to police cars, buildings, and public banners (see Figure 3). In one video, a blurred-out figure runs towards a seminary building, douses it with a clear liquid (presumably gasoline), then ignites the flames before fleeing the scene (@1500Tasvir 12/9/22). Other footage shows the burning of Ayatollah Khomeini's family home in the city of Khomein (@1500Tasvir 11/17/22), having since turned into a museum on the regime founder's life in Iran before exile, as well as the torching of additional seminaries (@1500Tasvir 11/16/22), and government buildings, including the Ministry of Islamic Communications (@1500Tasvir 11/26/22). In another video, two men approach a fire, carrying a large police shield, which they toss into the flames alongside what appears to be an already burning vehicle (@1500Tasvir 9/21/22). Out of 217 pictures and videos depicting the destruction of regime symbols, several show banners of Khamenei's face consumed by fire or trash cans set ablaze.

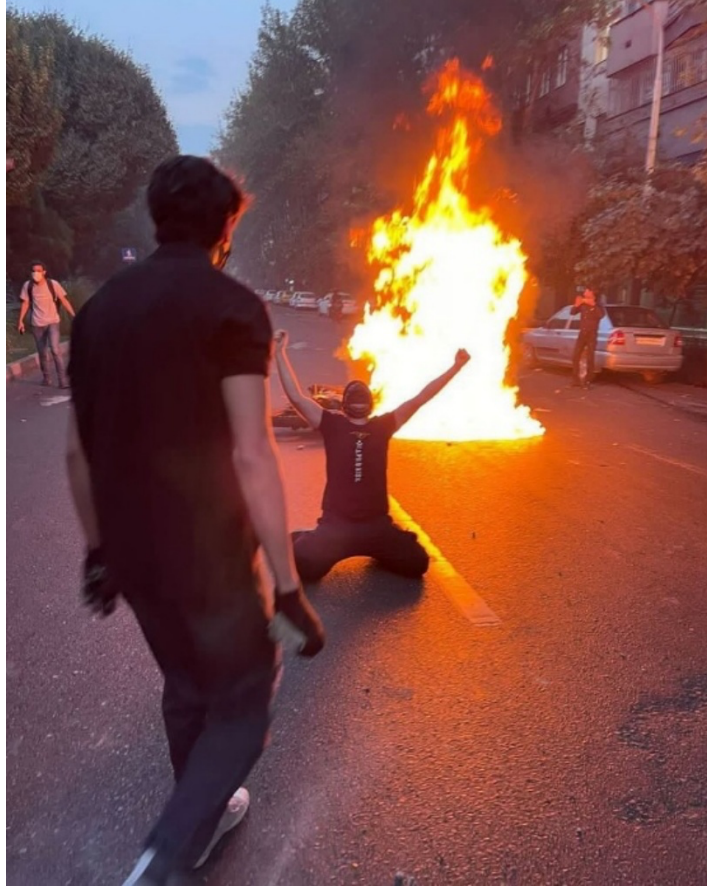


Figure 36: A figure kneels in victory in front of a police motorbike set ablaze (@1500Tasvir 9/28/22).

Fire became a defining element of WLF as a visceral expression of uncontrolled anger, drawing from other protest movements where fire has signified collective outrage and dissent. From the burning of draft cards in the Vietnam War to acts of self-immolation like Mohamed Bouazizi's, which ignited the Arab Spring, fire embodies what Hughes describes as “volcanic convulsions of anger and rage, envy and jealousy, (and) hatred and vengeance” (Hughes 2012, 3). It asserts ideological dominance over a space – as for example, with the Ku Klux Klan's cross burnings in the American South which symbolized the group's “pent-up emotions” and intolerance of the “free spaces” of Churches used for organizing in the Civil Rights Movement (Evans and Boyte 1992; Hughes 2012, 9). Mirroring the uncontrolled nature of a flame, fire symbolizes the uncontrolled nature emotions. In Iran, fire carries an additional layer of significance due to its deep

roots in Zoroastrianism, the historic religion of the Persian Empire, where the “eternal fire” symbolizes creation, purity, and continuity (Shenkar 2024). This cultural resonance thus gives fire a dual representation in WLF, as both a symbol of uncontrolled anger and a practice of renewing, or recreating, the spaces and symbols it burns.

Anxieties of Power and the Rise of Gen Z³⁶

As such rage-filled expressions filled the streets and signaled to the regime the difficulties in containing the scale of protests, authorities responded with a three-pronged strategy to reassert control over the public sphere. The first involved a series of preventative detentions, targeting those who had been active in past protests to “remove” them from public, limiting opportunities for further fanning the flame of protests. For example, on September 23rd, reports emerged that Narges Hosseini, the second “Girl of Revolution Street,” had been detained and taken to Kashan Prison in what was confirmed by the judiciary as a “policy of preventative detentions” (*Ostanwire* 2022c). Another “gender equality activist” was detained days later in the city of Rasht, also without evidence (*Ostanwire* 2022a). Such preventative detentions sought to limit the possibilities of seasoned activists getting involved in the movement, removing them as a deterrent in maintaining control of the public sphere.³⁷

The second strategy targeted the Internet and digital spaces stoking communications around protests, seeking to bring both back under the guise of the regime. For example, Internet

³⁶ This subtitle draws from Narges Bajoghli’s book *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*.

³⁷ In anticipation of more protests in 2023 nearing the one-year anniversary of Amini’s death, authorities leveraged this approach once more. They arrested several of Amini’s family members known to be outspoken on events and the family members of other slain protesters, in addition to over 600 other women in Tehran alone, with the majority released on bail several days later, after protests failed to take shape in the way authorities had predicted (<https://iranwire.com/en/women/120796-hundreds-of-women-detained-in-tehran-on-mahsa-anniversary/>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/mahsa-amini-death-anniversary-relative-arrested/32579472.html>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-family-members-slain-protesters-detained-anniversary/32584620.html>).

slowdowns appeared alongside attempts to block, and soon after, declare a total ban, of Instagram – the popular image-based social media platform that had become widely popular in Iran, particularly after remaining one of the few major platforms not blocked by the regime over the course of protests in the 2010's (*Ostanwire* 2022b). This move rushed along a user-protection bill proposed and refined several times in parliament over the course of 2021 and 2022, addressing the threat posed by social networks to Iran's national security (Gholipour 2021). The bill proposed an alternative Internet infrastructure – a version of which Iranian authorities had already been working on for years to no avail (*Reporters Without Borders* 2016) – that would drive out foreign social networks in addition to increasing surveillance through the creation of new government bodies tasked with developing technologies to control usage (Gholipour 2021).

The third and final strategy involved a more extreme state response matching what authorities deemed an equally extreme challenge to their rule: indiscriminate detentions and killings. Between September and December 2022 alone, there were 2,190 protests throughout Iran, becoming the largest anti-government demonstration since the Green Movement (Dubowitz 2023). In the same time, over 19,200 people had reportedly been detained, with nearly 700 of those being students, and over 500 more killed (*VOA Persian* 2023). Videos showing security forces dressed in black, armed with loaded weapons, and patrolling the streets exemplified the tactics underlying this strategy, many simultaneously showing the beatings, shootings, and detainments of protesters in the process. For example, one video from September 19th (@1500Tasvir) shows heavily armed security forces beating and dragging demonstrators down a quiet street while a woman, watching from a nearby house, screams for them to stop and release the protesters. Posts later revealing the injuries sustained by those having managed to escape reprisal showed legs riddled with pellet-gun wounds or bruises and welts from police beatings. These were an especially prominent feature

across women's bodies where injuries documented on social media depicted the state's violent backlash (see Figure 4).



Figure 37: A demonstrator captures the wounds on her legs sustained from clashes with security forces where pellet guns were often used to disperse protesters (@1500Tasvir, 9/28/22).

Within this intensifying crackdown, reports emerged showing some of those brutally killed in clashes with police to be schoolgirls as young as twelve (*BBC News* 2022). Nika Shakarami, a sixteen-year-old student, became one such example once her disfigured body appeared nine days after she disappeared in a protest, dumped on a street, showing clear signs of sexual assault and abuse (Hill, Miller, and Simkin 2024). Other detainees later confirmed that rape and torture were frequent punishments for those brought to Iran's prisons during protests, using tactics to brand the body as dishonorable and dirty (Qiblawi et al. 2022). Similar reports of another sixteen-year-old girl, Sarina Esmailzadeh, also described blunt force to the head and beatings across the body, resulting in her death (*BBC News* 2022).

Like with Jina, Nika and Sarina's cases were historicized through past-life pictures showing them happy, silly, and playful, propelling the same sense of injustice in framing their deaths. One video shared in the aftermath of Nika's death, for example, shows her parodying a classic Iranian song, *Soltane Ghalba*, on a makeshift stage with laughter from other young girls ringing in the background ([X.com/AlinejadMasih](https://www.x.com/AlinejadMasih), 10/4/22). Images of Sarina drew from her video blogs, showing her making pizza, chatting with friends after a sports match, or making goofy faces for the camera. One particularly poignant clip shows her singing in the car unveiled to Hozier's "Take Me to Church," as her younger sister smiles and shakes her head in the background ([X.com/mandela08940434](https://www.x.com/mandela08940434), 7/1/24). These images visualized the lives of young girls engaging in everyday, teenage activities against their ill fates, having succumbed to brutal killings by the regime for seeking to live out the lives they had documented, out in the open.

In his book, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, Shahram Khosravi (2008) argues that youth culture in Iran is fundamentally shaped by defiance to anything and everything the regime upholds as appropriate and desirable. Rather than showing interest in upholding the ideas of the revolution, young people's consumption patterns, ideas, and attitudes better reflect an interest in pursuing global cultural trends, as visualized in the many photos and videos shared around Nika and Sarina's deaths. As a result, this has instilled in authorities a deep-seated anxiety and intolerance of youth pushback. Young people exist at the very crossroads of the institutions, social relations, ideas, and norms that give meaning and identity to the Islamic Republic as a modern theocratic state, making youth defiance particularly problematic for crossing several regulatory and ideological thresholds (Khosravi 2008).

This culture of defiance is so prevalent among youth that many Iranians often comment – sometimes with pride, sometimes with frustration – that Gen Z is unlike any before it: they're

resistant to control, uninterested in traditional hierarchies, and unwilling to accept the status quo. Unlike the generation that lived through the Iran-Iraq War, or those who clung to hope during the reform era only to be met with disappointment, Gen Z faces fewer psychological constraints. They were raised with social media, globalization, and a vision of life fed to them through the many screens around them depicting a drastically different world from what they see in their everyday lives (*Iran International* 2022). As a result, they orient differently to public space – exemplifying an alternative culture where, because of the nature of the regime, *everything* they practice, seek, or value *is defiant*.

The regime’s killing of Jina and the subsequent targeting of young girls inadvertently tapped into this culture, combining with the feelings of rage already descending on the public sphere – as opposed to feelings of joy which underlaid renditions of protest in MSF – to insert defiance into everything. This is why girls’ schools, for example, emerged at the forefront of WLF, where young schoolgirls could be seen chanting in courtyards, waving their *maghnaehs* around school corridors, or momentarily seizing control of their classrooms for the distribution of their own propaganda (see Figure 5). Young woman embodied a culture where fear was not the defining factor determining the relationship between their bodies and public space. If anything, social media captured life as they lived it, only becoming highly publicized around protests in WLF.



Figure 38: Two girls posing with lifted peace signs in a classroom while a series of “Woman, Life, Freedom” themed cards lays in front of them ([X.com/FaridVahid](https://x.com/FaridVahid), 11/3/22).

Destroying Symbols of Regime Authority and Introducing a New Authority Over Public Space

In a series of images from girls’ schools, students are seen tearing pages from schoolbooks bearing images of the regime’s founder, flipping his portrait – often displayed prominently at the forefront of classrooms – or scrawling slogans such as “Woman, Life, Freedom” and “Mahsa Amini” across their desks. For example, in one video, girls take turns hopscotching over pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei (@1500Tasvir 10/8/22). In two other videos, they graffiti the tall walls of their schools – which for years have kept out the prying eyes of men – with “Death to the Dictator” (@1500Tasvir 10/3/22a;b). Another clip shows a girl in the corner of a classroom, methodically ripping up portraits of the regime’s founders before discarding them into a trash bin

beneath her (see Figure 6). These images adapt the destruction of the symbolic elements of public space seen in the early days of WLF – police cars, seminaries, banners – to the authoritative space of girls’ classrooms. Attacking the foundations of regime rule – i.e. by targeting the material elements underlying the regime’s ideological, symbolic, and repressive rule over public space – they re-organize the classroom around a new set of ideological commitments.



Figure 39: A video still showing a young schoolgirl ripping up a picture of the regime’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, next to a chalkboard reading “Woman, Life, Freedom” (@1500Tasvir, 10/3/22c).

Within and around this space, defiance becomes an ordinary practice, as it takes shape against anything that the regime has imbued with ideological significance. Hair, in particular, became a recurring focal point in many images showing young girls displaying their long or brightly colored hair – styles forbidden or actively suppressed by the regime. In one video, a young

woman calmly brushes her hair in the middle of a street, playing on the act's perceived abnormality within Iran's sociopolitical context ([X.com/ManBarayeIran](https://x.com/ManBarayeIran), 10/23/22). These images appeared alongside dozens of others showing women and girls' hair, turning what has historically been a visual marker of gender control into a visible assertion of autonomy.

Connecting with the feelings of rage pervading public space, hair-cutting became another act premised on the visibilization of hair. One example can be seen on September 20th where a woman sitting atop a utility box – drawing striking parallels to the utility boxes central to GRS protests – cuts her hair as a crowd claps and chants “Death to the Dictator” in the background (@1500Tasvir 9/20/22). Watching her struggle, another man climbs atop the box as well, lifting her ponytail, before taking the scissors to help her. As her hair falls, the crowd erupts in cheers, chanting *Bagheyrat!* – a term meaning "honorable," in direct contrast to the *Bisharaf!* ("dishonorable") chant often directed at regime enforcers.

Drawing on historical representations of grief and rage from Iranian folklore, where severing a woman's hair symbolized profound pain and rebellion, hair-cutting became a central feature of WLF for its radicality and symbolism in light of the events surrounding Amini's death. At Jina's funeral, her mother, overcome with grief, pulled at her hair as other women waved their headscarves in solidarity, drawing attention to the symbolic representations of the regime's gender rule and the grief that pervades it (Mehrabi 2022). Further demonstrations of solidarity appeared with women both in and out of Iran, sharing pictures of their shaven or cropped hair. Foreign celebrities such as Marion Cotillard and Angelina Jolie participated in this ritual from abroad, as

did women from the Iranian diaspora, many of whom symbolically cut their hair in front of thousands of demonstrators gathered in foreign capitals.³⁸



Figure 40: Locks of hair seen covering the ground of a girl's secondary school in Esfahan (@1500Tasvir, 10/17/22).

Tara Mehrabi (2022) explains that hair-cutting has long been a symbolic act of mourning and simultaneous defiance in Iranian culture, appearing both in ancient traditions and contemporary practices. She points to the depiction of Farangis in the *Shahnameh*, Iran's epic odyssey, who cuts her hair in grief over the death of her husband – a gesture that “represents a moment of great pain... (a display of) rage and anger, (and) a warning of what is yet to come, ignited by that fury” (2022, 116). This tradition persists among some ethnic minorities in Iran, including the Kurdish community. Given that Amini was Kurdish, the act of hair-cutting thus

³⁸ This act became so widespread that the MAXXI Museum in Rome even invited visitors to cut off strands of their hair in solidarity with Iranian women, later sending the collected hair to the Iranian embassy as a symbolic protest (ABC News 2022).

carries an even deeper significance, embodying the broader struggles of Kurdish people under the Iranian regime since the 1979 Revolution.

Hair is furthermore deeply sexualized and gendered as the most visible marker of womanhood in Iran (Mehrabi 2022). As a result, “cutting hair is an act of deterritorialization of their (women’s) heavily sexualized bodies” (2022, 118). It disrupts the regime’s rigid control over gender by “crossing the carefully policed, superficial, and imposed boundaries of gender operating through hair,” rejecting the state’s enforcement of compulsory femininity while reclaiming autonomy over the female body (2022, 116).

Few categorical examples better capture these dynamics than images from funerals where women publicly cut their hair in mourning for those killed by the regime. Young women often led these symbolic acts, as seen during the funeral of Javad Heydari, a protester shot during a demonstration, where kneeling behind his burial site, Heydari’s sister tearfully cuts her hair. Surrounded by a sea of mourners dressed in black, the act captures the grief and rage pervading the public severing of hair (@1500Tasvir 9/25/22). Similar scenes unfolded during memorials and forty-day mourning ceremonies – a significant rite in Shia Islamic tradition – for Nika Shakarami and Aylar Haghi (@1500Tasvir 10/27/22; 12/27/22). Perhaps most striking was the now-iconic image of Roya Piraei, daughter of murdered protester Mino Majidi, standing at her mother’s grave. Appearing with a shaven head while holding her severed locks in one hand and staring defiantly into the camera, the image emerges at the very intersection of rage and grief meant for display (see Figure 7).



Figure 41: Roya Piraei seen holding her cut off locks as she stands behind her mother's gravestone who was killed in protests by regime forces (@1500Tasvir, 9/30/22).

In the same way that hair-cutting both symbolically enacted a deterritorialization of the elements of sex and gender, hijab-burning played a similar role across many demonstrations where women used another symbol of the regime's gender order – the hijab – in destroying its ideological meanings. In some cases, it was not the act of burning the hijab itself but waving it in the air or discarding it (into trash piles, firepits, or the ground) in an expression of self-actualized freedom. For example, in several pictures and videos with fire as a dominant presence, women could be seen chanting, lifting (see Figure 9), or burning their headscarves. These images echoed motifs core to MSF – namely the lifting of the headscarf, appearing unveiled, or briefly engaging in defiant acts – but adapted them to WLF in reorienting women's bodies to the destruction of the symbolic elements guiding spatial usage and movement.

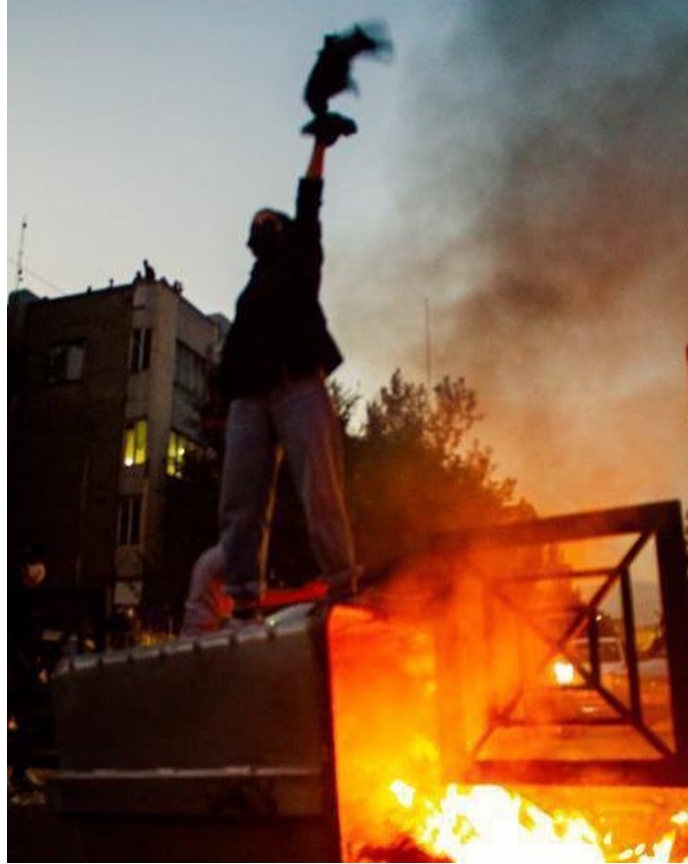


Figure 42: A woman stands atop a trashcan set ablaze as she lifts her headscarf (@1500Tasvir, 9/23/22).

Hijab-burning fused two opposing symbols in exemplifying this spatial shift: the regime’s marker of gender control and the emblem of gender defiance seen in past protests such as MSF and GRS.³⁹ For example, in one video, a woman runs around a massive bonfire, lifting her headscarf, as hundreds of demonstrators gather around. She pauses, twirls, then throws the headscarf into the flames, lifting her arms in triumph as the crowd erupts in cheers and applause (@1500Tasvir, 9/20/22). In another image, several women hold hands and dance around a fire (see Figure 10), while another video shows a woman recording herself as she raises a burning headscarf, joined by others doing the same. In the background, men clap and echo the chants of “Woman,

³⁹ I observed some examples of hijab burning in MSF, but they were few in comparison to WLF. While burning of the headscarf appeared across thirty-eight photos and videos in 1500Tasvir, I was able to account for only four such examples in MSF over eight years.

Life, Freedom” started by the women as they watch the fabric visibly disintegrate in the fire (@1500Tasvir, 9/21/22). In the same way that removing the headscarf momentarily for a photo no longer displayed joy, public dancing no longer represented a fleeting moment of happiness; instead, when performed alongside the fire, it becomes an embodied expression of autonomy and a visual convergence of the reconstructed elements declaring a new authority over public space.

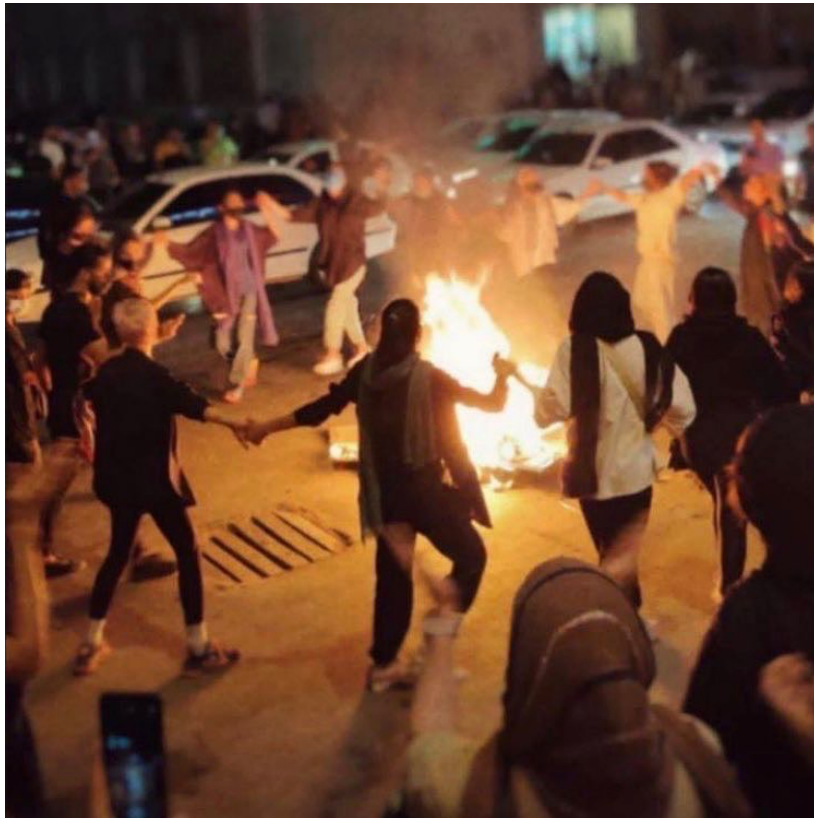


Figure 43: A group of women hold hands and dance around a bonfire, many of them without headscarves, during WLF (@1500Tasvir, 9/22/22).

In other instances, it was not the symbols inscribing gender onto women’s bodies, but rather those representing institutional authority over them, that became the targets of removal or destruction. These acts often mixed humor with rebellion in what Shadi Sadr calls “youthful mischief,” introducing an element of levity to protest (Esfandiari and Fatemi 2022). Clerics, for example, became a target of such acts in a mischievous protest tactic called “turban throwing” (عمامه پرانی) where young people slowly approached clerics in public and knocked off their turbans

before running away, often laughing as they evaded retaliation (Esfandiari and Fatemi 2022) (see Figure 11). These acts attacked the principal demarcation of a clergy member – his turban – while framing rebellion through humor, irreverence, and performative subversion.



Figure 44: A video still showing a young individual approaching a cleric in knocking off his turban, before running away (@1500Tasvir, 11/15/22).

Since the 1979 Revolution that made Ayatollah Khomeini and, later, Ayatollah Khamenei regime leaders, young people have rejected, mocked, and humiliated clerics as symbols of power in the Islamic Republic. Although not all members of the clergy align with the system,⁴⁰ the

⁴⁰ The Islamic Republic has a long history of oppositional activism from clerics within the establishment. In the 1980's, Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri was sidelined by Khomeini as the next Supreme Leader for showing opposition to laws infringing on democracy and human rights. Mehdi Karroubi, another cleric who, along with Mir-Hossein Mousavi, led the reformist ticket in the 2009 election, also came out in support of protesters for which him and Mousavi have since been confined to house arrest. Former President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani – also a

religious establishment as a whole has become synonymous with the regime – something young protesters recognize with sarcasm or scorn, often referring to clerics informally as “mullah” or “haji.” For example, clerics were the subject of many chants in WLF including “Canons, tanks, firecrackers – mullahs get lost!” which playfully protested the regime’s use of weapons to suppress dissent while ridiculing the clerical leadership sanctioning the violence. Turban throwing thus emerged from this longer disdain for clerical authority and a broader history where the removal of turbans has played a key role in protesting the clergy.

For example, after the 1999 University of Tehran dormitory attacks (discussed below), a member of the conservative student organization Ansar Hezbollah knocked off the turban of Tehran’s prayer leader in protests against the government’s violent crackdown on students (Azar 2022). Before his arrival in Iran, Khomeini also frequently attacked clerics supporting the Shah by suggesting they should “remove their turbans,” being unworthy of donning the symbol of clerical wisdom (2022). In many ways, young people reappropriated the act of turban-toppling for WLF as a pointed critique of the regime’s theocratic foundations and the clerical establishment’s historical role in the oppression of women. The turban, as a visible emblem of religious authority, became a target alongside other symbols of state rule such as hair and the hijab, dismantled and recreated around bodily autonomy and free gender expression.

The Re-Orientation of the Dissenting Body to Space

Mirroring the destruction and recreation of the symbolic elements underpinning the regime’s control over the body was the recreation of physical spaces central to regime authority

cleric – faced backlash for criticizing the hardline elements within government as well. His death in 2017 was the subject of controversy as his family claimed he has been killed by members of the regime for his political stances (for more information, see: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/rafsanjani-didn-t-die-natural-death-says-daughter/1359527>).

through embodied acts of resistance. After the protests at Kasra Hospital and Amini’s funeral, universities, for example, became one of the first locations where protests sprang up. On September 18th, eight videos from 1500Tasvir showed dozens of people walking in the street around the University of Tehran while chanting “Woman, Life, Freedom” and holding paper signs. By the following day, protests had already spread to other major universities, including Sharif University of Technology, Amir Kabir University, and Allameh Tabataba’i University as well (@1500Tasvir, 9/19/22a;b;c;d). The university quickly became a significant site of demonstrations throughout WLF – an example of which can be seen in Figure 12 – drawing from a longer history of contention pervading these spaces to subvert the regime’s authority and ideological power.



Figure 45: Students at the University of Tehran occupy a lecture hall, raising fists in solidarity with WLF, many of them holding signs reading “Woman, Life, Freedom” in different languages (@1500Tasvir, 10/3/22d).

In part due to the university’s foundational significance to the Islamic Republic – having been closed, purged, and reopened in the 1980’s following a “cleansing period” to realign education with revolutionary principles (Rezai-Rashti 2015) – these institutions evolved into key

sites of contention, testing the limits of state power. A stark example of this unfolded in 1999 when authorities launched a brutal crackdown on student dormitories at the University of Tehran, after students opposed the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salam*. Schools and universities had transformed into hotbeds of “reformist” ideology in the previous decade – especially in the wake of President Khatami’s election, when students rallied around his candidacy (*Middle East Eye* 2019). That is why, once students appeared to further transcend hardline rule with outright defiance of a regime order, authorities responded swiftly and violently, determined to reassert control over a space they feared was slipping away.

As one victim of the attacks recalls, the crackdown “felt like being in a film,” describing how plainclothes officers and paramilitary forces “set rooms on fire, threw students off rooftops, shot plastic bullets directly at students, and left complete chaos in their wake” (*Middle East Eye* 2019). Combined with the growing presence of women in higher education, who were slowly outpacing men in enrollment as they gained exposure to new ideas (Rezai-Rashti 2015), this incident inadvertently turned universities into even greater centers for dissent. Students became highly active in 2009 around Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s reformist platform, triggering further worries in the regime to prompt an expansion of its investments into conservative student associations once the Green Movement was effectively shut down. These groups doubled as tools to reinforce state ideology and monitor for transgressive behavior among peers, countering the perverse youth culture the regime saw as threatening to its rule (Golkar 2010).

As soon as students from the University of Tehran mobilized in WLF – a predictable flashpoint given the institution’s historical significance in light of the 1999 dormitory attacks – authorities wasted no time in deploying forces to prevent these “dissenting bodies” from further spatial manipulation. Instead of conforming to the regime’s ideological expectations, students had

actively reconfigured the segregated spaces of their universities, challenged the state-sponsored narratives propagated in lecture halls, and embodied a collective ethos grounded in equality and freedom of expression. This could be seen in two separate videos where male and female students ate together in a cafeteria, with one of the captions reading, “Until today they (male and female students) had been separated. But today they sit together, the women have taken off their *maghnaehs*, and the students chant” (@1500Tasvir, 10/4/22). These scenes appeared alongside dozens of other videos showing students chanting outside locked entrances, resisting administrative attempts to halt demonstrations, and occupying university auditoriums and courtyards in collective defiance (see Figure 13) – points that actively reconfigured these spaces around new ideological orientations to trigger regime worries.



Figure 46: Students stand pointing middle fingers to the university administration in Isfahan, after entrances were closed in preventing them from entering the school (@1500Tasvir, 10/1/22).

In these examples, protest was thus not just about resistance but reclaiming a normal or *ordinary* life – one which was inserted into public spaces such as cafeterias. Other examples showed these alternative realities across other spaces, where passersby documented women casually walking or exercising unveiled in showing active spatial reconfigurations. For example, in a post from October 7th, an older woman is captured standing in front of a cash register at a local bakery without the veil or manteau, reaching into her purse to pay for her purchase (@1500Tasvir, a). Another post from the same day shows a woman walking up a set of stairs, similarly without the manteau or headscarf, next to a wall graffitied with “Woman, Life, Freedom” in large black letters (@1500Tasvir 10/7/22b). The picture captioned solely as “Tehran” further frames the act as casual and ordinary, with no indication that it was staged for social media, as was common to posts from MSF. Like with the picture of a woman seen casually jogging in Tehran unveiled, as depicted in Figure 14, these images captured what already existed as an ordinary practice in Iran.



Figure 47: A woman captured casually jogging in public in Iran by a passerby ([X.com/SMohyeddin](https://x.com/SMohyeddin), 11-5-22).

The casualness of these images underscores a broader transformation of the street as an *ordinary space* where what was once a contentious site, with women under constant surveillance, is now rendered unexceptional. In this shift, the female body ceases to be a transgressive or disruptive presence and instead becomes integrated and normalized within public space. This reconceptualization of the body's relationship to space was emphasized in the early weeks of WLF by an anonymous Iranian author, sharing an essay contemplating the role of images in visualizing defiant actions long enough for them to be inscribed into the Iranian collective consciousness, making them routine and even, habitual. Reflecting on the many images emerging around WLF, she describes the moment she stepped "into" them with the following words:

The first moments of being "there," in the street, surrounded by protestors, were extremely strange. Only a day earlier, I had watched these protestors from behind a cellphone screen, marveling at their courage, choking up, and weeping at their actions. I looked around me and tried to synchronize the images of the street with the reality of the street. What I saw firsthand was very similar to what I had previously viewed on screen, but there was a gap between the spectator-I and the I-in-the-street that took a few short moments to recognize. For me, the street was no longer a site of fear but an ordinary space [faza-ye 'adi]. Everything was ordinary, even when the security forces attacked us with their batons, bullets, and tasers. I don't know how to explain the word "ordinary" or what better term I might use. The space between me and the images I had desired had grown very small. I myself was those images (Jadaliyya 2022).⁴¹

This suggested a new boundary around what was considered *truly* defiant, as the acts long situated within this category – being unveiled, relating with the opposite sex, and jogging – were now considered ordinary. Giving the examples of Vida Movahed's symbolic hijab-waving on Revolution Street and the many instances of women unveiled as part of White Wednesdays, the author argues that these earlier movements ignited the imagination, cultivating a latent aspiration

⁴¹ The essay was originally published in Persian on [Harasswatch](#) before an English translation appeared on *Jadaliyya* a week later.

among women to *become* the figures they saw across images. Enacting “historic mirrors for women,” these figures embodied *and* resisted all the ways women had been constrained under this particular gender regime. Additionally, they envisioned an alternative world where these acts were no longer transgressive but seamlessly embedded within the everyday fabric of public life.

This longing for ordinariness formed the emotional and political core of Shervin Hajipour’s protest anthem *Baraye* (“For”), in which lines such as “*because of the fear you feel while kissing*” or “*for the sake of a laughing face*” rendered the everyday a powerful counterpoint to the normalized suppression of such acts under the Islamic Republic. A member of Iran’s Generation Z himself, Hajipour composed the song by compiling tweets from the early days of WLF expressing personal motivations for joining protests (Olszewska 2022). The song resonated widely, garnering 40 million views within its first 48 hours, and quickly became an unofficial anthem of the movement. It was frequently heard at demonstrations, both in and outside Iran, where participants recited the lyrics in emotionally moving, often tearful clips ([X.com/ICHRI, 11/15/22](https://x.com/ICHRI/11/15/22)). One of the lines adapted from a tweet even explicitly articulates the “longing for a normal life” (Olszewska 2022), with images circulating around the song visualizing the same. In one, two unveiled women casually dining at a restaurant unveiled seemingly unfazed by their surroundings embody the ordinariness articulated throughout the lines of the song (see Figure 15). Eating their meals while two unidentified figures sit near them and appear indifferent to what, under regime laws, would be considered a radical sight, the women exemplify a reorientation of their bodies as an ordinary, rather than defiant, occurrence.



Figure 48: Two unveiled women seen casually dining at a restaurant in Iran ([X.com/Shahen_Samadi](https://twitter.com/Shahen_Samadi), 9/29/22).

Other examples of this body-space re-orientation appeared in physical interactions with strangers in the streets, drawing them in warm embraces that visualized an acknowledgement and reciprocation of such nudges for open intimacy. For example, in two separate videos, young girls can be seen standing on what appears to be a sidewalk with their arms spread wide, silently inviting passersby to hug them (@1500Tasvir, 10/10/22; 10/19/22) (see Figure 16). Reminiscent of the global “Free Hugs” campaigns, these interactions served as both an outright rejection of the regime’s norms around public male-female contact (given that men often accepted the invitation), and a symbol of unity between people embracing each other in ways they may have been fearful of displaying openly in the past (Laine 2011). Similar to another series of self-recorded videos where individuals extend their fists toward strangers in the streets, inviting “fist bumps” (example: [X.com/IranIntl_En](https://twitter.com/IranIntl_En), 11/7/22), these images enacted embodied displays of solidarity and

compassion. People inherently knew how to respond to the “call” put forward by the act, guided by what they perceive as an acceptance of such physical interactions, even if only among passersby.



Figure 49: A video still showing a male figure hugging a young woman offering “free hugs” in the street, as part of WLF, with a sign reading “Hugs for a sad nation” taped to the wall in the background (@1500Tasvir, 10/19/22).

The Manifestation of a New Authority Over Public Space

In mid-November, calls for a strike circulated both on and offline as a spontaneous act of remembrance for the 2019-20 Aban Protests, during which over 1,500 protesters were killed by regime forces. The strike, planned for November 15–16, aimed to demonstrate solidarity with the current movement while signaling its potential to disrupt the state’s economy. Pictures shared on

the 1500Tasvir page thus showed demonstrators handing out slips of paper reading, “poverty, corruption, and high prices. We will go until we overthrow” to share word of the event (@1500Tasvir 11/13/22; 11/14/22). Around the city, banners hung over highways echoing the same message, publicly announcing the strike (@1500Tasvir 11/14/19).

If, until then, WLF had dismantled the symbolic foundations of state power by recreating space, the body, and social relationships around ideals of equality and free expression, the nationwide strike marked the culmination of this transformation. Within two days, videos circulated of shuttered storefronts across cities in Iran, further affirming the emergence of a new, collective authority over public space to have made this happen. Many of these clips identified the location, emphasizing the strike’s broad reach, with narrators noting that “most” or “all” businesses were closed as they passed rows of lowered shutters (see Figure 17). Even traditional bazaar merchants – long viewed as regime loyalists – appeared to join in, with clips showing protestors marching through the bazaar clapping, whistling, and chanting “Woman, Life, Freedom” against the backdrop of closed doors. Those who remained open faced public condemnation as demonstrated in a video noting that only “the banks and the dishonorable (*bisharafha*)” stayed open, implying that those who did not participate were complicit with the regime (@1500Tasvir, 11/15/22). Other clips showed protestors stopping in front of open shops to chant “*Bisharaf!*”, applying public pressure for them to close.



Figure 50: A picture showing several closed businesses in Iran, after calls for a nationwide strike as part of the WLF uprising (@1500Tasvir, 11/15/22).

Before the strike, rebellious acts had been embodied, visualized, and repeated across the various public spaces of Iran, but they still operated within the framework of the regime where the body remained vulnerable to the regime’s systems of surveillance and retaliation. The strike marked a departure from this previous model – removing the body from the scene entirely. It rendered visible the movement’s widespread support beyond just street protests and illustrated how WLF had begun reshaping not just symbolic space but the material structures and functions of public life. In doing so, it signaled that preferences for a new gender order were no longer “falsified” (Kuran 1991), nor merely aspirational – rather, a new gender order had already emerged in actively reorganizing the uses and meanings of public space.

One example demonstrating this shift appeared in moments of male-female solidarity captured in several protest videos. In one, demonstrators marching through a mall during the strike engaged in a call-and-response practice where women chanted “Woman, Life, Freedom,” while men responded with “Man, Homeland, Prosperity,” exchanging complementary values in a

symbolic performance of unity. In another, groups of young men and women exchanged the chants “You’re the slut, you’re the whore,” – terms historically used by regime officials to demean unveiled women – with “I’m the free woman” (@1500Tasvir 11/17/22). These exchanges were reminiscent of the kinship practices seen across GRS where men and women collaboratively performed and visualized the values underpinning the movement. However, WLF embedded them within practices that fundamentally reshaped public space.

Expressions of solidarity also took shape through public art, where banners, performances, objects, and graffiti became representative of WLF even in the absence of demonstrations. These acts transformed public spaces by replacing state symbols with those of the movement, appearing prominently following the death of protesters by embedding their images into the fabric of the city in memorializing them. For instance, a banner of Nika Shakarami covering a commercial billboard advertised her “concert in heaven,” referencing a widely shared video of her singing released posthumously (@1500Tasvir 10/11/22). Another showed her portrait hung from a highway overpass, accompanied by the slogans “We are all Nika” and “Fight till the end” (@1500Tasvir 10/16/22), serving as both a tribute and call for continued defiance.

In another video captured by a passerby, three individuals are seen hanging a banner depicting a blood-red map of Iran, overlaid with a woman’s flowing hair and surrounded by red handprints – an image repeated across various public artworks to symbolize the regime’s role in the death of protesters (see Figure 18). These displays appropriated the state’s own tools of symbolic dominance – banners, billboards, and public art – repurposing them in real time to reflect unfolding events. Documented and circulated on social media, they extended the geography of the movement and represented its continued encroachment upon public space.



Figure 51: Three figures wave their headscarves on a highway overpass above a banner including the map of Iran in red and a woman's hair draped over it – symbolizing women's hair which was central to WLF (@1500Tasvir 10/5/22).

The color red emerged as a recurring motif in such public art installations, symbolizing the blood of slain demonstrators and the regime's hand in their deaths. Several pictures showed red handprints smeared across public buildings, schools, and transportation vehicles, symbolizing blood, similar to the photo above. Another video shows several hands lifted in the air with red paint on the palms (@1500Tasvir, 10/9/22). In one video, protesters raise red-painted palms into the air as they sing near Tehran's Azad University (@1500Tasvir, 10/9/22b), while another clip from Daneshjoo (Student) Park shows red-painted nooses suspended from trees (@1500Tasvir, 10/8/22b). On October 7th, a series of photographs captured fountains dyed red, presumably by demonstrators, turning city fixtures into public displays of state violence (see Figure 19). These acts engaged in a process of strategic capture, using otherwise ordinary spaces and objects to

demonstrate widespread resistance, spatial re-creation, and a creative response to updated events. The last point is particularly vivid across these examples as artistic expressions often took their inspiration from state repression.

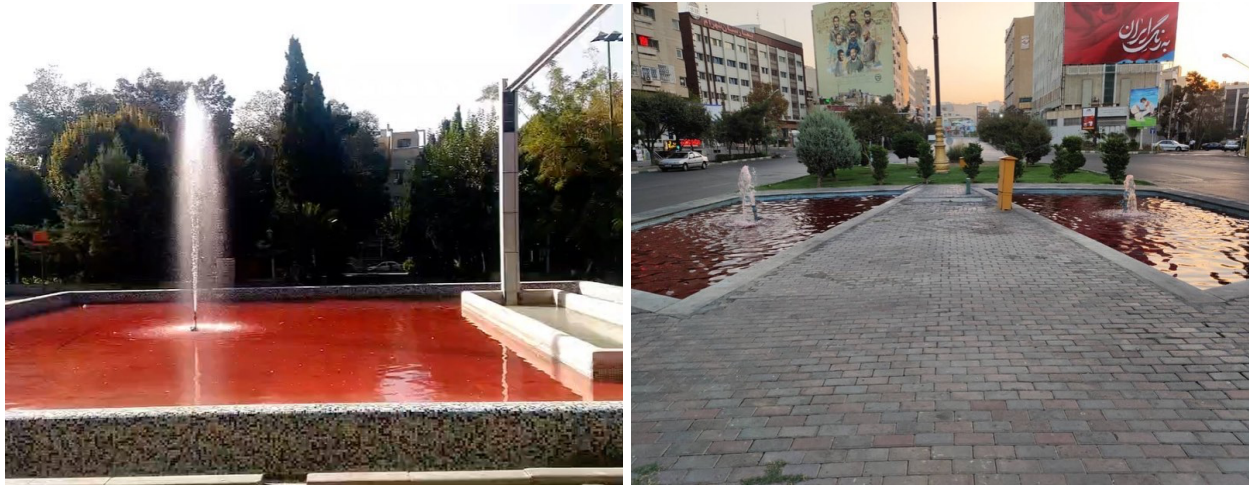


Figure 52: Public fountains seen dyed red in support of WLF around Iran, symbolizing the blood of those killed in protests (@1500Tasvir, 10/7/22).

One example of this real-time proliferation appeared in response to the image of Khodanoor Lajei, a detained protester shown tied to a pole with a glass of water placed just out of reach (see Figure 20). Lajei, an ethnic Baluch, had previously been detained and released before joining a demonstration in Zahedan – later known as “Bloody Friday” for the violent state crackdown in Sistan and Baluchistan province, during which he was killed (Yazdan Panah 2022). The image, reportedly taken during his detention, circulated widely amid claims that he had requested water, only for prison guards to mock him by placing it where his tied hands could not reach. Presumably leaked by authorities as a form of intimidation, the image instead sparked widespread outrage and moral shock, giving rise to performative reenactments across Iran and internationally.



Figure 53: Khodanoor Lajaei, a Balooch protester, sits tied to a pole after being detained for participation in the WLF movement. The photo shows a glass of water placed before him after having told guards he was thirsty, in taunting and humiliating him (@1500Tasvir, 10/4/22b).

Following reports that Lajei had been killed during Bloody Friday, recreations of the image of his restraint appeared across universities, on the streets, and even at sporting events. For example, on the fortieth day after his death, individuals honored his memory by reenacting the pose by embracing flagpoles or trees with bowed heads (@1500Tasvir 11/10/22). At the University of Kurdistan, one particularly captivating display featured a row of students encircling an open space, each mirroring Lajei's posture (see Figure 21). The image also entered athletic performances where, in one example, Hashem Shirali mimicked the pose on the court after scoring a goal during a Futsal Premier League match, sitting with his arms outstretched and head bowed ([X.com/arminarefi](https://x.com/arminarefi), 11/12/22). In another instance, Miad Yazdani of Chooka Talesh FC recreated the act during a soccer match, sitting in the same position while a teammate placed a glass of water in front of him in an unmistakable allusion to the image of Lajei's torture ([X.com/arminarefi](https://x.com/arminarefi), 11/12/22). Like with the many other artistic expressions of defiance in this section, these

performative displays used moments of state repression as inspiration for new expressions of dissent. They pushed dissent into the unexpected spaces of the bazaar and sports matches, remaking them through embodied (and disembodied) displays of resistance.



Figure 54: Students from the University of Kurdistan perform the torture of Khodanoor Lajaei viewed above ([X.com/Sima_Sabet/11/15/22](https://x.com/Sima_Sabet/11/15/22)).

Subversion, Reclamation, and Counter-Subversion: The Body as a Battlefield

Beginning in November, authorities began responding much more aggressively to protests, taking particular aim at students and young women who had been the center of WLF. For example, in mid-November, hardliners began touting the idea that students should be subject to fines, tuition payback, or ten-year travel bans for their role in protests (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022f). Meanwhile, other factions took matters into their own hands. From November-March 2023, girls' schools were the subject of gas poisonings, leaving hundreds of female students hospitalized across Iran (Motamedi 2023b). Despite sources of the attacks left unidentified, many pointed fingers at ultra-conservative backers of the regime whom had previously been responsible for acid attacks on women (Shahi 2023).

In response, one viral image of a young girl in her school uniform and backpack, wearing a gas mask and holding a sign reading “Woman, Life, Freedom, until the last breath” demonstrated defiance to such measures (see Figure 22). The picture contrasted to regime attempts to punish the students who were key drivers of protests by showing their continued resolve – an image that perhaps continued to make schools targets of repression in 2023. By April, Iran’s Ministry of Science, Research and Technology put out an official statement that girls who do not comply with hijab laws would be denied public education (*IranWire* 2023b). By August of that same year, dozens of university professors and administrative professions were purged following any indication that they had supported WLF (Ghazi and Kaviani 2023). These strategies took aim at students in efforts to assert control over the bodies and spaces that had fueled dissent.



Figure 55: A young student holds a sign reading “Until the last breath – Woman, Life, Freedom” while wearing a gas mask as she prepares to leave for school, following a string of gas poisonings in girls’ schools ([X.com/Sima Sabet](https://x.com/Sima_Sabet), 3/4/23).

Other strategies took aim at the bodies of dissidents during demonstrations, “branding” them with a unique suppression strategy targeting the eyes with pellet guns and rubber bullets. One article noted the strange nature of repeat injuries early on, suggesting they allowed authorities easier access to protesters after they fled the scene (Engelbrecht 2022). Knowing they would require treatment for the injury at a hospital, authorities often arrested them there instead. Alongside other strategies negating the death of protesters altogether – by, for example, claiming those killed had committed “suicide” (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022a; Hill, Miller, and Simkin 2024) – the body became the sight of a new discursive and visual battle between authorities and demonstrators, each seeking to assert control through new narratives and acts of dissent.

For example, several images appearing after these incidents showed those having sustained eye injuries posing with a smile and symbolic hand gestures such as peace signs ([X.com/AlinejadMasih](https://www.x.com/AlinejadMasih), 12/1/22). Another widely circulated picture of a woman following her punishment in the form of 74 lashes for “appearing unveiled” showed her posing with her marked back, holding a sign reading “Woman, Life, Freedom” (see Figure 23). Like with past renditions of protest in WLF, these images showed continued defiance by using state repression as sources of further resistance. They made the body a site of contestation that constantly took shape against authorities’ attempts to bring it back under the guise of state control, refusing to retreat back into the private sphere.



Figure 56: A woman poses with her lashed back to the camera while holding a sign reading “Woman, Life, Freedom” (X.com/AlinejadMasih, 12/1/24).

Attempts at asserting bodily control were also not limited to the living. State forces took aim at the bodies of those killed during protests to remove the sites of mourning available to family members and to dispute reports on their deaths. For example, Nika Shakarami’s body was found abused and disfigured, showing clear signs of assault and abuse from repeated blows to the head from a baton (Hill, Miller, and Simkin 2024). After Nika’s family agreed to alternative versions of her death, ruling it as a suicide, and to not hold funeral services in limiting opportunities for the mass protests appearing around other slain protesters, authorities agreed to return the body back to the family for a burial in Khorramabad, in Lorestan province (Ghobadi 2022). Nevertheless, on the day of the planned burial, Nika’s family received word that authorities had in fact already

buried the body in Veysian, a small village of about 2,000 people, in evading what they knew would be mass demonstrations (Ghazi, Askary, and Scollon 2022). Hundreds of protesters gathered at the site of her planned burial in Khorramabad regardless, joining her family in mourning around a makeshift funeral (Ghobadi 2022).

In an extreme strategy seeking to eliminate the dissenting body altogether, authorities also began issuing death sentences to detained protesters in November 2022, a response which had, until then, not been seen with such haste. On November 12th, a protester was handed a death sentence in connection for his activities in WLF (*Radio Farda* 2022). In addition to five other protesters who were each handed multi-year jail sentences, a spokesperson for the judiciary noted, such rapid escalations were meant to “serve as a lesson and deterrent... (for those) disturbing public order and peace, gathering and colluding to commit a crime against national security, and engaging in war and corruption on earth” (2022). Three days later, a second protester was handed a death sentence for having reportedly “set fire to the motorcycle of a citizen, and attacked a person with a knife” (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022e). Both sentences were carried out days apart in early December (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022b; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022d).

In the two years following Amini’s death from 2022-24, Iran experienced a whopping seventy-five percent increase in executions (*Iran Human Rights* 2024). While data from September 2020-2022, shows a total of 815 executions, that number rose to 1,425 in the period between September 2022-2024, showing a severe uptick in how the regime used executions as a political tool. Given this fact, protests largely slowed down in December compared to previous months. Whereas 851 protests were recorded across Iran in October and 749 in November, by December

that number had shrunk to only 280 (Dubowitz 2023). In January, the number further decreased to 241, with many of those being labor strikes (2023).

Many detainees also faced unusually harsh sentences, with judicial proceedings also accelerating at a pace not seen in previous protests. By mid-November, preliminary verdicts had been issued for 2,432 individuals, many charged with crimes related to corruption and attempts to overthrow the state (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022g). Iranian celebrities and artists, having come out in large numbers in support of WLF by posing unveiled, releasing statements condemning violence, releasing protest anthems akin to *Baraye*, or partaking in foreign interviews were also targeted (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022c; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022h).⁴² Among them was rapper Toomaj Salehi, whose outspoken criticism of the regime and viral music condemning the state led to his arrest and a charge of “corruption on Earth,” an offense punishable by death (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2022c).

Despite the regime’s efforts to suppress mass demonstrations, one form of defiance continued to visibly proliferate across Iran: a striking number of women appearing unveiled in public spaces (see Figure 24). What had once been confined to private settings, shared discreetly on social media, or performed symbolically during campaigns like My Stealthy Freedom, now unfolded in everyday life, in a wide range of spaces and across diverse demographics. Social and news media alike captured this shift, documenting women moving through streets, parks, shops, and airports without headscarves – often in groups, and often without incident. One woman interviewed described this transformation as a merging of her private and public lives, saying she had begun to dress outside the home as she did abroad or in private (Fassihi 2023). In the same

⁴² Iranian celebrities – often at the receiving end of criticisms for complying to the regime’s censorship of art, film, and song – were a vocal group during WLF. Over thirteen articles in my analysis of state repression covered celebrity and athlete protests and retaliations.

interview, another woman recalled hesitating before heading to the airport without a veil, only to be surprised by the number of unveiled women passing through security without confrontation, adding that “our power is in numbers” (2023).



Figure 57: Video stills of a woman recording a scene from her car showing several women walking by a wall reading “Woman, Life, Freedom” casually not observing the hijab ([X.com/AlinejadMasih](https://x.com/AlinejadMasih), 7/14/23).

In response to the widespread acts of unveiling, authorities moved to reassert control through two main strategies. The first targeted the establishments frequented by unveiled women. This approach had precedent in the years leading up to WLF, when businesses, taxi drivers, and public transport workers were pressured to report women violating hijab laws, with the incentive of avoiding fines themselves if caught serving them (Hakakian 2021). For example, in 2019 alone, 547 restaurants, cafes, and businesses were closed “for not observing Islamic principles,” according to Tehran’s police chief, Hossein Rahimi (*i24 News* 2019). In 2023, similar tactics re-emerged with reports showing a pharmacy in Tehran forcing to close after unveiled women were said to have frequented the establishment (*Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* 2023a). Within days, members of the National Library received text messages revoking their memberships after reportedly using services without proper hijab (*Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* 2023b). By July, dozens of “cafes, restaurants and other commercial and recreational venues” had been shut down all over Iran, all of them for having failed to enforce mandatory hijab laws (*IranWire* 2023a).

The second tactic involved expanding technological surveillance in public spaces, using tools such as security cameras to monitor and identify women violating hijab laws (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2023). This proposal was introduced by a branch of the National Security Council in thinking about ways to enforce hijab laws without “physical punishment” (2023). Emerging in the wake of widespread reports that officials had dissolved the morality police – reports later disproven by the reappearance of their vans in the streets – these automated enforcement methods marked an attempt to depersonalize and anonymize punishment. They sought to reduce direct confrontations in public spaces, thereby limiting the opportunities for women to record and share such encounters online.

The consequences of these surveillance structures quickly became tangible, as women began receiving text message notifications accusing them of appearing unveiled in public – an expanded and more technologically sophisticated iteration of earlier efforts seen during MSF (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2023). Around the same time, Parliament passed the long-debated Hijab and Chastity Bill, marking a new phase of legal enforcement with steep penalties. The bill introduced fines of up to \$2,350 for women found unveiled in public, along with a host of additional restrictions including “impediments to passport renewal, vehicle registration, obtaining exit permits (to leave the country), releasing impounded vehicles, and acquiring or renewing driving licenses” (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2023). These measures represented an all-out assault on women’s access to the public sphere by tethering their compliance to basic public services and mobility (2023).

Lastly, in its latest iteration of technologically driven repression, the state also expanded its surveillance strategy by merging earlier tactics placing the onus on businesses to report unveiled women with a new digital application that deputized ordinary citizens as enforcers. The

application, called *Nazer* (meaning “surveillance”), enabled users to act as “hijab monitors” by anonymously reporting women for violations of hijab laws (Parent 2025). Designed to minimize direct confrontations that had previously drawn public scrutiny when filmed and shared online, the app allowed users to discreetly upload details such as the time, location, and vehicle license plate of any woman seen in public without a headscarf (2025). In doing so, it sought to normalize and crowdsource the surveillance of women’s bodies while reducing the visibility of state enforcement.

Together, these tactics reflected a systematic response to each dimension of the challenge that WLF posed to the regime’s gendered order. In the face of broad coalitions rallying around women’s demands, the state resorted to harsh deterrents – i.e. executions and long prison sentences – aimed at dismantling solidarity and discouraging participation. Youth, who had formed the backbone of the movement, were met with layered forms of repression including attacks on girls’ schools, restrictions on access to education, and the dismissal of teachers and professors who had expressed even symbolic support. The bodies of women themselves became targets – both in life and in death – used as leverage to pressure grieving families into silence or turned into sites of symbolic violence, as with the targeted mutilation of eyes that had come to represent WLF’s visual lexicon. The mass presence of unveiled women in public was additionally countered through the expansion of surveillance technologies and new legal frameworks, designed to entrench state control. These tools worked not only to monitor but to depersonalize enforcement, reducing the possibility of public confrontation and minimizing the chances that such encounters could be captured and repurposed as further acts of resistance.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the strategies underpinning the Woman, Life, Freedom movement fundamentally reshaped the relationship between women's bodies and space, catalyzing a widespread reclamation of that space. Where fear had long dictated how women navigated the public sphere – even in earlier protests like MSF and GRS – WLF reoriented public defiance around a sense of ordinariness and cultural saturation. Defiance was already embedded in youth culture, woven into the everyday practices, desires, and values of young people. Thus, once young girls became key targets of repression, the movement inadvertently tapped into this broader cultural repertoire, inserting defiance into everything. Alongside mass demonstrations, casual observations of women unveiled in public, brushing their hair, and hopscotching over Ayatollah Khamenei's picture claimed authority over public space, making these once-risky gestures feel expected, commonplace, and even aspirational.

At the same time, the rapid escalation of defiant acts – especially those centered on gender such as hair-cutting, hijab burning, and male-female call-and-response rituals – was driven by another powerful force animating public resistance: rage. Anger and a pervading sense of injustice, fueled by Amini's death and the state's subsequent response to demonstrators, shaped how defiance unfolded across public spaces. Her death, widely framed as a gendered injustice and visually linked to a longer history of women's oppression, choreographed a wave of collective outrage that subsumed the streets. Burning symbols of state authority such as police cars appeared alongside gendered iterations of the same with hair-cutting and hijab-burning. These acts destroyed the visual markers of the state's gender order, replacing them with gestures of solidarity such as hugging, public art, and embodied performances which, instead, both articulated the demands of equality and free expression core to the movement, and turned the spotlight on state repression.

The gradual undoing and remaking of the body eventually triggered a more forceful state response in the form of executions, seeking to eliminate the dissenting body altogether or, at the very least, instill fear back into it. Other strategies harnessed updated forms of surveillance and targeted specific body parts during protests in *re*-branding it, creating a new repressive apparatus intent on bringing the body back under the guise of state control. Yet this is precisely where WLF both echoed and diverged from past iterations of women's dissent. The culture of defiance shaping how women now moved through space had been cultivated over years of visually witnessing and learning dissent through images. But by the time of WLF, images no longer served as the primary catalyst for defiance – they had become its backdrop. Cameras now captured acts that were no longer rare or imagined, but routine. Defiance operated not as spectacle, but as part of the everyday. The space between image and action collapsed: the image was no longer a momentary act of protest to be imitated – it was life itself.

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This is neither a “feminist revolution” per se, nor simply the revolt of Generation Z, nor merely a protest against the mandatory hijab. This is a movement to reclaim life, a struggle to liberate free and dignified existence from an internal colonization.

– Asef Bayat

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I explored the emergence, evolution, and impact of women’s visual protests on a repressive authoritarian gender regime in Iran. I showed how women’s challenges to the regime mirrored an increasingly hostile response on the part of authorities, seeking to dismantle this form of activism with new tactics of control. In between the dynamics of resistance and repression, women provoked a significant challenge to the state’s material and ideological power structures – both explaining the severity of state response and the reason such protests remained integral to women’s activism for over a decade. These back-and-forths highlight the innovative ways women make advancements on their claims for gender equality using social media, images, embodied protests, and the exploitation of weaknesses in the Iranian state’s power structures. By offering new insights on women’s protest strategies and the vulnerabilities of authoritarian gender regimes to new forms of agency in the twenty-first century, this work advances critical knowledge of power and protest in new directions.

Visual protest emerged as a creative strategy of defiance to the Islamic Republic’s public morality laws, tackling the various elements that construct and uphold their enforcement. As I showed with a historical analysis of women’s resistance since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have pushed back against such laws – broadly dictating their public behavior and dress – using both legal and norm-based challenges evolving over the years against a changing political backdrop. They targeted discriminatory laws and unequal gender practices in

a gradual assertion of their rights for bodily autonomy, leveraging openings in the regime structure appearing favorable to women's demands. Regards of ideal timing, however, these challenges were systematically suppressed by regime forces. As I further showed, gender is embedded into the regime's material and ideological foundations, making challenges of this nature particularly threatening. Progress on women's issues using institutional means were thus largely abandoned by the late 2000's, just as new digital technologies – and the subversive visual cultures largely motivated by them – emerged, leading to new forms of expression and agency tackling public morality laws from the “outside.”

When “My Stealthy Freedom” (MSF) erupted in 2014, these nascent cultures forged a space for women to bring experiences long isolated, suppressed, or relegated to the private sphere, to the forefront of the public sphere. Camera phones and social media facilitated the emergence of dispersed interactions and visual expressions that gradually motivated women to test the waters on more immediate, direct, and contentious acts – not just overcoming the barriers to free expression in public but challenging the entire gender order. Visually defiant acts reappropriated the technologies of fear, isolation, and the threats of violence undergirding compliance to public morality laws, applying them instead to state forces in drawing attention to the violence and harassment that pervades women's everyday experiences with gender discrimination.

A key aspect of these visual acts was their gradual encroachment on public space. Using images, women both made the public spaces used to stage subversive acts inclusive of their rights and framed them as ordinary and routine using prefigurative practices that gradually shaped new identities and embodied relationships around them. By the time “Girls of Revolution Street” (GRS) emerged in 2018, these processes appeared increasingly complete as new coalitions took shape around open, public demonstrations of defiance to compulsory hijab. As a result, once Vida

Movahed climbed atop a utility box to lift the headscarf on a stick – with passersby observing, witnessing, and recording her to share online – the extraordinary feature of this act was magnified by the ripple effect it created: others soon followed her example, while countless more showed support by intervening in arrests, aiding women in evading reprisal, or voicing what they would have done had they been there.

In an authoritarian regime that systematically suppresses information – keeping its citizens under constant doubt as to just how many others support such acts as a consequence – this was an important signal to women, society, and the state that such issues were gaining momentum across the public sphere. They were early signs that a new authority was taking shape across space – an authority mediated by visibility as evidenced by a video appearing a mere months before “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF) erupted as a third wave of women’s defiance. As detailed in Chapter 3, the woman placing headscarves on the ground for others to step over did not have to verbalize her intentions. Passersby inherently knew what to do as they followed her signal in walking over the headscarves before continuing on their way. Visually defiant acts had imprinted such demonstrations of resistance on people’s minds through repeated observations online. Once a formidable grievance thus emerged with the death of Jina Amini in police custody, these internalized acts of resistance erupted and amassed the public sphere, concretizing this new authority in how people articulated their dissatisfaction with the regime.

WLF showed that the increased visibility of women’s protest acts and gender-based grievances, further materializing in the empathetic responses to demonstrators in GRS, completed two of the most important elements of movement formation and execution: visibility and public support. These were, however, added with a third element: the full takeover of public space. Rage over Amini’s death allowed for a near decade of women’s visual protests to find footing once again.

Public burnings of the symbols of state rule and new expressions of protest erupting across various spaces from universities to bazaars made pervasive disagreement with the gender order and defiance to its spatial architecture. Within these escalating tactics, the momentary rebellions showing women ditching the headscarf or dancing in a mosque appeared as well – but they were no longer just staged acts captured for sharing on social media. The platforms and cameras instigating such rebellions had exceedingly fallen to the backdrop as they no longer motivated, but rather, captured these acts as they appeared in real-time. Such pervasive and constant resistance – eventually leading up to frequent sightings of women appearing without the headscarf altogether – showed that fear, surveillance, and public scrutiny had become less of a mediator between women and obedience. Rather, visual acts had laid the early foundations for such rebellions to now become normalized and commonplace, with the state unable to contain their widespread nature.

Throughout these waves of protest, the state was an active player in shaping the landscape of resistance and dissent. Repressive strategies paralleled innovations in digital and physical defiance in attempts to contain challenges to the state's gender regime and, for the most part, succeeded as all three waves of protests largely floundered and the laws and practices comprising the gender order, today, remain in place. As I demonstrated with numerous examples showing more inventive strategies coupling brute force with new, economic challenges in Chapter 5, if anything, the state has only grown more resolute in its position on women and gender. New draft legislation including harsh punishments such as denial of education and travel access, in addition to increased prison time for violators, have emerged in the months following WLF as ways of pushing women back into the private sphere. Technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality have also appeared alongside such measures, comprising state attempts to regain power over women's bodies and their sexual, mobilizational, and presentational capacities (George 2023).

Nevertheless, women's protests *did* matter, as evidenced by shifts in the power dynamic now forcing the state to play "catch-up" in its attempts to control women's bodies. Exemplified by the sensitive points of the regime's ideological and material foundations that digitally shared images touched over time, visual protest movements had profound implications on the state's ability to portray itself as hegemon, uprooting its tools of enforcement towards the creation and fortification of an alternative gender order that appears increasingly in-tact. The imagined, hidden, and stealthily practiced visions of womanhood, public presentation, and male-female relations that played out online over years are now an everyday reality for many women, even though they continue to take shape in an environment driven by fear and repression.

These outcomes point to several takeaways from the research and analysis I presented across this dissertation. Chief among them is the recognition of the political stakes embedded in digital visual content. The alternative expressions, identities, and relationships forged through women's visual acts over time compel a reconsideration of how images disrupt dominant visual regimes – regimes that link the gendering, sexualization, and regulation of bodies and spaces to a broader visual-technological apparatus in service of power. Beyond visibility alone, these processes have profound implications for the state, as identity, subjectivity, and their perception are central to how the state disciplines bodies into compliance (Foucault 1975; Mirzoeff 2011). In authoritarian contexts – where such disciplinary practices are further interwoven with state-building projects like colonization and modernization – visual dissent fractures the ideological coherence of those efforts. Images, then, are not only shaped by power but also act as potent instruments in its contestation, particularly in tightly controlled regimes where the state remains the central locus of authority.

Given the repressive power pervading such contexts, this research further shows how images become embedded into the dynamics of mobilization and dissent, enabling actors to shift strategies and manipulate the temporal and spatial layout of physical space in challenging authoritarian rule. This process demands a high degree of flexibility, as dissent under such conditions rarely follows the linear trajectories of traditional social movements. In this sense, images present themselves as particularly adaptive mediums, enabling actors to maneuver perceived threats, constraints, and opportunities in the environment with more ease. The decentralized, hybrid forms of visual protest examined here overcame the need for large-scale social movement organizations and significant financial resources. Instead, through slower, iterative processes of learning and adaptation, actors circulated strategies based on observed shifts in their environment – strategies that others then appropriated and shaped to fit their own localized contexts and needs.

Such decentralized organizational tactics necessarily demand creativity which leads me to my next point: creativity is the motor for social change in authoritarian contexts. In environments marked by constant repression, movement actors must not only adapt to shifting conditions but also innovate, envisioning and enacting alternative possibilities where few seem to exist. While existing literature often highlights creativity and resilience as traits of resistance, these qualities are frequently framed as individuated and disconnected from their broader environments. This dissertation challenges that framing by showing how individual acts of resistance can scale into collective movements that reshape the very structures they confront. Much like the “nonmovements” Bayat illuminates in his research, digital tools facilitate change through gradual reform, while channeling that change into more direct, coordinated efforts (Bayat 2013). Creativity, in this sense, becomes both a byproduct of constraint and a generative force, through

which actors carve out new openings, setting in motion a process others recognize, adopt, and amplify.

In Iran, women integrated images into protest out of circumstance. However, over time, images proved to have important functions for sustaining protest in the face of violence while targeting elements upholding the regime's broader apparatus of control outside a narrow focus on compulsory hijab. Unlike earlier efforts, such as those led by the women of the Sixth Parliament or the One Million Signatures Campaign which framed demands within a legal or legislative framework, visual protests operated on a different register. These images rarely called explicitly for the repeal of "public morality laws;" instead, they embodied a more profound challenge to the entire gender order. It was perhaps exactly for this reason that images, rather than more petitions or legal-based challenges, found a home in women's protests. They targeted and uprooted the entire system of gender control – making them a particularly effective tactic under a political system where control over women's bodies is the basis for broader political and social control.

Future research would do well to consider the broader political implications of alternative forms of expression and communication made possible by digital technologies. For scholars of women's movements and mobilization among minoritized communities, this area of inquiry is particularly vital. Embodied protest and performative resistance remain central to these groups' strategies of dissent, offering creative ways to confront the multiple and intersecting forms of power imposed upon their bodies. This dissertation represents a preliminary effort to bridge the often-siloed disciplines of political science and media studies, proposing a more expansive framework for understanding feminist media practices within the context of political struggle and social transformation. Just as Iranian women have made visible their remarkable political creativity, there exists a wider world of subaltern groups whose imaginative strategies for

challenging entrenched power structures remain underexplored. Given our current political moment, these are lessons we cannot afford to ignore.

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