

Review Article

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Women, Life, Freedom; Reading the Reflection of Iranian Women Movement through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

What is happening in Iran evokes the injustices and discriminations that has happened everywhere in the world. National and international reflections of the 2022 Iranian movement indicate that it would not be limited to fundamental changes in Iran. Fundamental changes go beyond geographical and political boundaries to bring the human family closer and to be mindful of their share destiny of human rights. Women from diverse backgrounds will take more responsibility for their crucial role in creating peace, security, equality, and justice within the human family.

This article investigates the ongoing women's movement in Iran through the photo and camera records on Instagram and Facebook published by Iranians worldwide. It maps an historical glimpse of the women's movement in Iran after the Islamic revolution and describes the forms of civil disobedience portrayed. It signifies the reconceptualization of global solidarity, diversity in political representation, and decision-making among observers, academics, and social activists. This article describes a transition from individual salvation to collective maturity for fundamental changes in human relationships.

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A Historical Glimpse

Qajar Dynasty

The contribution of Iranian women during social and political changes has a long history; in contemporary times, it began about 200 years ago. In 1852, Tahirih was killed for teaching women and men a different theoretical framework of thought. She was an influential adherent of a social, intellectual, and spiritual movement in 1844 in Iran called the Babi movement.

Tahirih Qurratu'l-Ayn was born Fatimah Baraghani sometime between 1814 and 1817 to a Muslim religious family. Her father and her uncles were well-known Shia clerics in Qazvin, 150 kilometers northwest of Tehran. Their descendants are still prominent figures in Qazvin and have financed the city's large mosque and a school named Salehieh. Tahirih was an influential poet, women's rights activist, and theologian of the Bábí faith in Iran. Historians believe that Tahirih was the first Babi woman to refuse to wear the hejab. She believed that women must engage in society and enjoy equal rights with men, a concept that was certainly unheard of in nineteenth-century Iran [1].

During the Badasht conference, Tahirih's refusal to wear the hejab led to confrontations between government agents and the Babis. Tahirih was forced to go into hiding, but authorities eventually

arrested her and charged her with the murder of her uncle. For three years, she was a prisoner at the house of Tehran's police chief. In mid-1852, she was executed secretly [1]. Before her death, it is believed that she declared: "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."

Fast forward to the modern era, in the spring of 1891, a protest was initiated, which became known as the Tobacco Boycott or Tobacco Movement (The concession was made to the British by Naser al-din Shah for a full monopoly over the production, sale, and export of tobacco for 50 years). The protest was led by the bazaaris and supported by leading clerics. In May 1891, Násiri'd-Din Sháh ordered Sayyed Ali Akbar Shirazi, a prominent cleric in Shiraz and strong opponent to the concession, to be expelled from Iran to Iraq. Before his departure from Iran, Shirazi issued a fatwa against the concession in December 1891, banning the consumption of tobacco [2].

The consumption boycott quickly spread all over Iran, and bazaars in cities and towns were closed. Násiri'd-Din Sháh was forced to cancel the concession in early January 1892, and Shirazi annulled his fatwa on January 26. During the Tobacco Movement, women played a critical role. In the Shiraz demonstrations, government forces killed a woman and her young daughter. It is said that even the women of the royal court refused to serve water pipes to their husbands [2]. In his book, Ebrahim Taymouri writes women's perseverance in this movement was such that when the ban on tobacco was announced, they led the protestors who were marching toward Násiri'd-Din Sháh Palace. As they passed through the bazaar, the women closed down the shops [3].

One woman who played a leading role in the Tobacco Movement was Zainab Pasha. She invited men to join in the fight against the oppressors. During a conversation with a group of men, she said: "If you men do not have the courage to punish the oppressors... wear our veil and go home. Do not claim to be men; we will fight instead of you." She then took off her veil and threw it at them, a courageous act for that time. Zainab was also an admirable organizer of women whom she encouraged to take a stand on issues. During the boycott, she even led groups of armed women who would shut down shops that had reopened under government threat [2].

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, which aimed to establish a parliament in Iran, provided another platform for Iranian women to engage in political action. One popular way of protesting the dictatorship was by staging sit-ins in mosques, where revolutionary clerics would speak. Women played an important role in protecting the clerics in the mosques. In addition, women's presence in the protests prevented the regime's soldiers from shooting at the masses [2].

Women formed many secret or semisecret associations to organize activities in support of the Constitutional Movement. They also took part in demonstrations. Historians describe that as the carriage of Mozaffar al-din Shah (1853–1907) was taking him to the home of a rich aristocrat, it was attacked by a group of women marching in the streets. The carriage had to stop [4]. One woman read out loud a statement that said, in part, "Beware of the day when the people take away your crown and your mantle to govern."

One of the most influential women of that era was Bibi Khanum, also known as Bibi Khanum Vaziri; she was a highly influential intellectual. At a large gathering in Tehran in 1906, some of the women issued a two-paragraph resolution. The first paragraph described the need for the establishment of schools for girls, while the second called for the abolition of heavy dowries for young brides, arguing that the money could be better spent on their education [2]. This movement led to Bibi Khaum's founding of the first school for Muslim girls in Iran in 1907; however, Sadigheh Dowlatabadi opened the first girls' school in Esfahan in 1918, who was forced to close it after only three months. These schools produced some of the first educated Iranian women and some of the first prominent ones of the modern day [2].

Women actively participated in all the gatherings and demonstrations for a constitutional government. When protestors took refuge in the British Embassy in 1906, many women were among them. Mozaffar al-din Shah finally relented. He signed the order to draft the Constitution and the elections for the first parliament on August 5, 1906 [2]. The Constitution did not grant voting and many other rights to women, however, when the parliament approved the establishment of Iran's first national bank without any help from foreigners, women raised money and donated their jewelry. The underprivileged women removed their earrings and offered them as support for the scared movement [2].

The counterrevolutionaries, led by Mohammad Ali Shah (1872–1925) who had succeeded his father in 1907 abolished the Constitution, declaring that it was against Islam and ordered the shelling of the parliament and executed several constitutionalist leaders in 1908. The revolutionaries resisted, and women including the aforementioned Zainab Pasha and her group fought alongside their men against the government forces. It is said, "In one battle between the Constitutionalists and the counterrevolutionaries, 20 dead revolutionary fighters turned out to be women." When a cleric

who backed Mohammad Ali Shah gave a speech in a Tehran's square, a woman attacked and killed him. She was arrested by government forces and executed right there in the square [2].

After that, a group of Tabrizi women, known as the Women's Committee, sent a telegram to a women's group in Istanbul and asked them to tell the rest of the world what was going on. The Istanbul group sent letters to the queens of Germany and England. Tabriz was under block for 11 months by the king, during which the Tabrizi women helped the Constitutionalist fighters resisted in any way they could. Some of them fought in male uniforms alongside men without revealing their identities. Kasravi writes, "Women in Azerbaijan upheld the nation's honor more than anyone else." The historian also reported having seen a photograph of 60 female Mojahadin, as the revolutionaries were called at the time [4].

The Constitutionalists finally liberated Tehran in July 1909. Mohammad Ali Shah escaped Iran and was replaced by his young son, Ahmad Shah (1898–1930). A woman who played an important role in Tehran's liberation, Bibi Maryam Bakhtiari, fought so bravely that she was given the honorary rank of commander. After Tehran's liberation, the second parliament began its work, and the number of women's organizations grew [2, 5].

While struggling against gender discrimination, women were also very active in their opposition to interference in Iran's affairs by Russia and Britain. On one occasion, women played an important role in the liberty and dignity of the Persian people. Fifty thousand people poured into Tehran's streets and declared a general strike. Hundreds of women, wearing the kafan and wailing, took part in the demonstrations. A large protest with thousands of women was held in front of the parliament in 1911, at which many spoke [6].

Three hundred women who were covered in their plain black chador with the white nets of their veils dropped over their faces, held pistols under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves and gathered at the parliament and demanded that the chairperson of the parliament admit them all. When women confronted him, they exhibited their revolvers threateningly, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their husbands and sons leaving behind their own dead bodies if the deputies hesitated in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation [6].

Pahlavi Dynasty

At this time, the parliament approved a new civil code that granted women the right to ask for divorce under certain conditions. The legal age for marriage for girls was increased to 15. Reza Shah ordered his minister of education to establish a Women's Center headed by Reza Shah's daughter. In 1935, Reza Shah ordered the compulsory unveiling of women. He and his family attended the graduation ceremonies at the Women's Teacher Training College in Tehran the following year. The royal women were all unveiled, as were all the other women who were there. The same year, the University of Tehran accepted its first female students. Supporters of the monarchy consider the forced unveiling an important step in Iran's modernization. Perhaps it was, but it also led many women who had actively taken part in the political and social processes during the Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath to stay home in objection to the ruling [7].

Between 1941 and 1953, women actively participated in the nation's political discussions. This participation was significant enough that some political groups began setting up organizations for women [7]. The government of Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad

Mosaddegh granted women the right to vote in the municipal councils in 1952, equal rights with men when a new social insurance code was ratified, furthermore maternity leaves, benefits, and disability allowances. In return, women supported Dr. Mosaddegh strongly, as in the demonstrations of July 21, 1952; however, the CIA-MI6 coup of 1953 that overthrew Dr. Mosaddegh's government again put a temporary stop to the gains that women were making [7].

In 1963, at the time of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (second king of the Pahlavi Dynasty 1919–1980), women were granted the full right to vote in all elections; furthermore, he introduced the country's first family protection law in 1967, which restricted men's former absolute rights in divorcing their wives. A second family protection law introduced in 1975, granted women equal rights for divorce, custody of children, marriage settlements, and limited rights of guardianship. The legal age of marriage for girls was set at 18, and considerable restrictions on polygamy were also imposed. Women were also allowed to be judges, deputies to the parliament, and even members of the Cabinet [2, 7].

In such an advanced situation for women, many intellectual women considered their political advances as fake. The dictatorial rule had made it impossible for intellectuals, political dissidents, and opposition groups to be openly active. There was no free press, no democratic elections, no true opposition, and heavy-handed censorship of all media and publications. So, the fact that there were, for example, 22 female parliament deputies and two female senators in 1978 -all of them Shah loyalists - impressed few women [8].

At the same time, the situation for women was not as rosy as the Shah wanted the public to believe. The government's own statistics indicated, for example, that even in 1976 when the Shah was boasting about Iran reaching the "Gates of the Great Civilization," only 26 percent of women living in urban areas and a little over 3 percent in rural areas were literate, while 87 percent of women were without any job. Many women lost their lives in their struggle against the Shah and his rule. With almost no exception, they were all either university graduates or university students and were members of two lefty's organizations [8].

Islamic Revolution

In 1979, the situation of women profoundly changed after the Islamic revolution, women were not allowed to work specific jobs, and polygamy became legal. Women lost their right to divorce or travel without their husbands' permission. The supreme leader of the Islamic revolution claimed that women were oppressed during two periods in Iranian history, once in pre-Islamic Iran and again during the Pahlavi regime. However, Khomeini declared that Islam involves women in every aspect of life, like men. The compromised political structure that emerged was a complex unification of theocracy and democracy. Women became the first target of the Islamic transformation. The re-introduction and the strict enforcement of veiling, the elimination of the family protection law, and sex segregation all became signifiers of the new Islamic state. Women in this context became the leading cultural force to create a new social imagination of the Islamic republic that differed from the previous western influence [9].

Demographically, Iran, with a population of 85 million, is now a very different country than it was in 1979. Seventy-five percent of the country is urbanized, literacy stands at almost 100 percent among people under twenty-five, and there are 4 million university students, the majority of whom are women. Meanwhile, the fertility rate has fallen to 2.1 births per woman from 6.5 in 1979. While

women's education and participation in society were encouraged, their primary role was to use education to benefit their families and be good mothers and wives [10].

The first women's movement started right after the Islamic revolution on 8 March 1979 (women's day), 26 days after the victory of the Islamic revolution, in opposition to the mandatory hijab. It was not just in opposition to the compulsory Hijab but also to the violation of women's rights in the new law. From that moment on, Iranian women never gave up their struggle. They have nurtured this mindset generation after generation and we now witness how young girls and boys sacrifice their lives for women, life, and freedom. There are several hallmarks in the protest against compulsory Hijab that has happened by individuals, such as Homa Darabi, and in a collective/connective way such as White Wednesdays, My stealthy freedom campaigns, and Girls of Enghelab Street.

The Current Uprising

The tragic death of Mahsa Amini on 13 September 2022 in the morality police headquarters ignited a countrywide uprising in which women are highly visible in terms of quality and quantity. Amini's death struck a nerve throughout the nation. The state's refusal to look into the causes of her death, or to offer an apology, further extended the anger of protesters. Demonstrators soon began to chant, "Don't be scared, don't be scared, we are all together." Many issues besides women's rights are bound up in the current uprising: authoritarianism, economic stagnation and severe unemployment, climate disaster, and various religious-fundamentalist impositions. The current uprising also represents the public's response to the regime's corruption and to its confrontational foreign policy and regional expansionism, which have isolated Iran and contributed to extremely high inflation in the country. In fact, the entanglement of some elements makes this moment unique [10].

Two months before Mahsa's death, in July 2022, Sepideh Rashnu was arrested after she was recorded arguing with a veiled woman on the bus over a forced hijab. A few weeks later, national TV aired the program showing her giving a forced confession and apologizing to the veiled woman. The national TV showed bruises on her face which was the sign of torture to send a clear message to the opponent of Hijab. Since then, the presence of the morality police increased their violence while arresting women filmed and circulated on social media.

The story of Mahsa's death mediatized quickly. Her lifeless body on the hospital bed, and the image of her parents in the hospital crying and desperately hugging each other, were circulated through social networks and drew the attention and empathy of people. Her name as the hashtag (Mahsa Amini) in Twitter, and her funeral was widely spread on the digital space that symbolized the anger of the people with the unfair policies of Islamic government.

The "Woman Life Freedom" slogan reverberated for the first time at Mahsa's funeral, and women took their headscarves off and waived in the air. This slogan originated from Kurdistan and was used by members of the Kurdish women's movement in 1987. From this point, the protests escalated to different cities. Women became at the forefront of the protests, while men and other groups joined and followed them. Many women courageously stand in front of heavily armed officers and remove their headscarves to burn or throw aside. Many others cut their hair that is not merely a mourning ritual, but stems from an Iranian epic.

One Last Word

The government of Iran has, for the last four decades, seen women as the first opposition and has accused them of being against national security. However, women have never stopped their struggle to change the situation. Although the laws have not changed, something more critical has. Women see and feel their own agency. A significant number of Iranian women believe that achieving human rights is necessary to achieve women's rights. They have tried to avoid ideological, religious, or political agendas. They want to build a better world for all humanity.

Although the current uprising is entirely spontaneous and has no leader, its value-based framework caused the world to look at it with surprise and admiration. In my opinion, this uprising is not a national, but global, and fundamental movement that leads to irrevocable changes, eventually among all nations. The current world order is shaking. People around the world are learning to be each other's voice. No one can truly enjoy one's own welfare while the rest are suffering. The experience of corona pandemic reminded us of the principle that, regardless of our differences, we are one family. If one group of women is deprived of their education, freedom of expression, control over their bodies, or even basic human rights, a truly global prosperity is hard to achieve one requires the active participation of each and every human being. The analogy of the human body offers a clear example of my argument. In order for it requires all the diverse the human body to be healthy, it needs each and every diverse organ to function [11-16].

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