
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Politics of the body in the ‘woman, life, freedom’ movement in Iran: A commentary

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ABSTRACT

On 16 September 2022, nationwide protests broke out in Iran in reaction to the death of a 22-year-old girl, Mahsa Amini, who was killed by the morality police for not wearing a ‘proper hijab’ and led to the first women-led movement in Iran. This commentary explores the importance of this movement and historical moment as it relates to the form of resistance that is being exercised in fighting against the oppression of women under the current gender apartheid of the Islamic Republic. I examine the main slogans, symbols, and icons of this movement in the context of the politics of the body and a reclaiming of women’s bodies in a fight against a patriarchal dictatorship.

KEYWORDS: gender apartheid; body; oppression; feminism; Iran; politics

On 16 September 2022, nationwide protests broke out in Iran in reaction to the death of a 22-year-old girl, Mahsa Amini, who was killed by the morality police for not wearing a 'proper hijab'. For those of us who have been following the recent social movements in Iran, this does not come as a surprise. Although many Iranian women have been fighting against the systematic oppression imposed on them for the past 40 years—since the 1979 Islamic revolution—their movement has gained a new momentum in recent years. One can trace the inception of the most recent wave to what is famously known as 'Girls of Revolution Street', which began in December 2017 (see for example, Rahimpour, 2018 or Kalvapalle, 2018). At that time, a number of brave women removed their hijab in public in a symbolic gesture as a sign of protest against mandatory hijabs in Iran. Many of these women were arrested and imprisoned. (Many names of prominent figures stand out in the Iranian women's movement, some of which are currently serving unusually cruel long prison sentences, such as Nasrin Sotoudeh, Narges Mohammadi, Shirin Ebadi, Vida Movahd, Shaparak Shajarizadeh, Fatemeh Sepehri and Masih Alinejad, amongst others.)

GENDER APARTHEID

The Iranian regime treats women as second-class citizens, nothing short of a gender apartheid. It must be called out for what it is. Women in Iran are not only forced to wear the hijab from the age of six (basically as soon as they start elementary school), but experience systematic discrimination in all aspects of life. To give a few examples: they do not have the right to divorce; they are not automatically given the custody of their children; they need the permission of the first ranking man in their family to leave the country; and their testimony is worth half as much as a man's.

Gaining control over the body of women was the very first strategy that the Islamic republic employed after the revolution in order to establish its power in the country. According to Milani (1992), the hijab became mandatory for all Iranian women, including foreign visitors, in April 1983. A homogeneous religious attire was most notably imposed on women from early on. For example, schoolgirls are forced to wear uniforms that cover them from head to toe, mostly in dark colours. They are encouraged to keep their head coverings on even in all-girl classes. They are discouraged from any accessories, makeup, or nail polish that would distinguish them from one another. They are regularly chastised by the school authorities for any expressions of their individuality.

It has been nearly impossible to study the impact of early mandatory hijabs on Iranian girls and women due to the restrictions in Iran. However, we can speculate. The bodies of women have been used as the most important means of control for the Islamic regime. By taking away opportunities for individual expression, girls and women are reduced into non-subjects. They do not belong to themselves but to the state. The state comes to determine the most private aspects of their bodies, for example, whether they can remove their facial hair, dye their hair, shape their eyebrows, and so on. In some instances, there have even been

restrictions placed on removal of their pubic hair. The state believes it has the right and the jurisdiction to intrude into the most private spheres of a woman's life. Women have no choice in this. It does not matter if they are believers or non-believers of Islam. It does not matter if they are secular, atheist, Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian. The state wants all of them to be exactly the same.

Mandatory hijab (which includes not only a head covering but also long-sleeved knee-length uniforms and loose pants) can be limiting in very practical ways. It makes being physically active extremely difficult for girls and women. For instance, riding a bicycle is almost impossible in that attire. I recall from personal experience that since elementary school, we found very creative ways of tying our uniforms, so we could play basketball or volleyball. The dark colours, long sleeves, and unbreathable material can make the wonderfully hot summers of Iran unbearable. While it is true that over the years Iranian women have come up with very fashionable designs for the hijab, the uniforms remain pretty much the same at schools, government offices, hospitals, and so on. These uniforms are meant to make the woman's body extremely unattractive as well, which can induce a lot of shame for some women who cannot connect to that version of themselves. It is like being forced to wear clothes that do not fit to a social event. It takes away the pride and joy in the body.

I am fully aware that this type of movement may create a dissonance in the narrative of some Western feminists, who are committed to inclusivity, to promoting tolerance towards Muslim women, and to fight against Islamophobia. There is a big difference however between *choosing* to adhere to a specific attire for religious purposes and to be *forced* into wearing a religious attire, as a means of oppression. *When a woman chooses to wear the hijab, it becomes a form of her individual expression. However, when a woman is forced to wear the hijab, it acts to limit her individual expression and therefore it becomes oppressive.*

Underlying the discourse of the Islamic republic is a moralistic view of women's body and sexuality. Iranians are familiar with the icon of the pious woman, who is a model of chastity, subservience, and obedience. There is a sacrificial quality to this woman. She has given up all of her 'earthly egoistic' desires to the service of her family, the religion, and, I would argue, the state. These ideals place the pious woman in the position of the righteous and the woman who chooses to take back control of her body and sexuality in the position of the defiant. The latter has given in to hedonism and Western individualism and is therefore lost in her ways. The former is bestowed with a duty to lead the lost woman back on track. See, for example, the following passages from the leader of the Islamic revolution, Imam Khomeini (translation by Shaw & Arezoo, 2001):

In response to a question about the need for hijab, 'We are concerned mainly with the younger women who when they make up and dress up draw hordes of young men after them. It is these women we're stopping. They don't need your sympathy.' (September 12, 1979) (p. 54)

Wherever one looks in Iran, one sees women pursuing Islamic activities, religious and even political activities, while at the same time preserving their modesty and their dignity. Whereas

those women who freely mingled with men in society produced nothing other than corruption throughout the whole of the [*shah*] period. (November 27, 1982) (p. 68)

I ask the youth, the girls and boys, not to sacrifice their independence, freedom and human values, regardless of the trouble and suffering this may cause them, for a life of luxury, pleasure, indulgence and frequenting the centres of corruption which the West and its agents, man without a country, open to you. (June 5, 1989) (p. 83)

MORALITY POLICE

This is the essence of what we call the ‘morality police’ in Iran. They are there to preserve the order of the state, while they advertise their mandate as maintaining the chastity of society. For them, the defiant woman is a traitor of the state. She is impure and spreads impurity. (Take for example Hamid Rasaei, former member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly’s comment about the most recent protests: ‘The protestors’ demand for freedom is that they want to sleep with someone new every night and graze like animals.’ [Mehrabi, 2022].) She threatens the very power structures of the regime. Her hair, her body, her makeup become dangerous. She needs to be stopped at any cost and put back in her place. The defiant woman is dangerous because by expressions of her individuality, she is reclaiming her status as a subject. A subject that can choose for herself rather than just following what she is told by a religious authority. A subject that as Lacan says is a *desiring being* (Fink, 1965) and these desires can threaten the absolute power of a dominant gender-apartheid state that demands submission of its citizens, especially its second-class citizens.

As relational analysts, we are fully aware of how power structures can enter the unconscious and inform individual decisions outside of awareness (Rozmarin, 2017). For the Iranian woman, it has been the fear of removing her hijab, even when she is the only person walking on a deserted street. The school, the insinuations, and the morality police instill fear such that each Iranian woman begins carrying a small version of it in her head. From anecdotal accounts, I am aware that many Iranian women have a shared dream in which they find themselves having accidentally stepped outside of their homes without their hijab and this makes them feel very scared.

Another important aspect of the state’s control of the body is manifested in the way punishment is carried out for those who break Islamic law. Public lashing and executions have been another integral part of the exercise of dominance by the Islamic regime in Iran. That lashing is chosen as the method of punishment for ‘anti-Islamic conduct’ brings forth once more the importance of the politics of the body. Lashing marks the condemned with an intention ‘either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 34).

The public torture and execution marks the triumph of the state over the body of the defiant, and in the most concrete way imaginable. The Iranian regime frequently exercises

public hangings for political dissidents at major intersections using a very large crane, making the spectacle impossible for people to ignore (see, for example, Amnesty International's report, 1990). This 'policy of terror', as Foucault (1977) calls it, has been a significant mechanism of control, 'to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign' (p. 49).

So, the body of political dissidents swing high up in the air in the most powerless manner. And the body of Mahsa is crushed. So are many other bodies that are easily beaten up, bruised, or scarred on the streets by the morality police, who have the absolute blessing of the ruling power behind them. The spectacle of being picked up by the morality police, happening in public view and often drawing a lot of spectators, is the theatre of power of the Iranian government. So, when Iranian people rise up to protest the death of Mahsa, whose body was brutally treated by the morality police for no real crime, it is not without historical precedence.

POLITICS OF THE BODY

Mandatory hijab does not exist in isolation. It brings with it a whole set of ideologies, limitations, disciplines, and institutions created to maintain it, and so on. It is related to politics of the body in a system that aims to gain control over an individual's mind by means of controlling their body. I would like to draw from the ideas of Michel Foucault to delve deeper into understanding the importance of the body in structures of power and more specifically the dynamics that are being played out in Iran. Foucault writes:

The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its force... A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved... (Foucault, 1977, p. 138)

In what he designates as a "'new micro-physics" of power', Foucault delineates how discipline institutions come to employ techniques of 'a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body' (p. 139) in order to establish their agenda and power. He emphasizes the importance of *details* in creating a kind of discipline that controls the most minute aspect of the body, and therefore of the person. He writes of Napoleon that 'he wished to arrange around him a mechanism of power that would enable him to see the smallest event that occurred in the state he governed' (p. 141). As an Iranian reading these passages, I cannot help but to think of the similarities with the goals of the Iranian Islamic Republic, and its thirst for meticulous control of every aspect of its citizens as mentioned above.

Foucault (1977) writes about 'a military dream of society' that prevailed the ideas of 18th century Europe: 'its fundamental reference was not to the *state of nature*, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the *primal social contract*, but to permanent coercions, not to *fundamental rights*, but to indefinitely progressive forms of

training, not the *general will* but to automatic docility [emphasis added].’ (p. 169). I believe this passage summarizes the underlying ideology of the Islamic regime of Iran. One does not have to dig any further than the recent propaganda video clip prepared by the government titled, ‘Hello Commander’ to discover this. In this video clip, little children are turned into soldiers for the state and their absolute assimilation and subordination is desired. They are not only dressed in the same way, they are also trained to behave the same way.

But this passage also contains within it what Iranian people, especially the women, are demanding at this moment in history. They have decided not to submit to ‘automatic docility’ anymore, to take back their will, and demand their most natural fundamental individual and collective rights. Indeed, the symbols of this movement have from the beginning revolved around natural aspects of the human body, such as a woman’s hair, and a sense of unchaining or liberation of beauty as a force against the restrictive rules of the regime. It stands in sharp contrast to the propaganda video clip. Not surprisingly, the ruling body is continuously warning the public about the dangers of such release, of these women who are ‘coming loose’ so to speak.

So, the body becomes the battle ground. The resistance starts with liberation of the body. The mandatory hijab has become an important symbolic icon in the individual and collective political psyche of Iranians. It not only symbolizes oppression of bodies, but the general oppression of every citizen, man, or woman in Iran. It symbolizes the oppression of freedom of speech and freedom in general. It is not surprising that the most unifying slogan in the recent uprising has been ‘woman, life, freedom’. It starts with the bodies of the women, and it ends with the freedom that every person desires.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The bravery of the Iranian women is exemplary at this time as they risk their lives by removing the mandatory head covering in public and burning it. This act of defiance is another spectacle, the spectacle of resistance, of reclaiming their bodies and their freedom. These women are fully aware that the state will return with severe forms of punishment. At the same time, they have chosen to liberate themselves once and for all from the power that rules over them. Gradually, the bravery has spread and for the first time, we have a movement in Iran that is largely led by women.

So, for those who ask whether this movement is going to bear fruit, I would like to suggest that it already has. What was meant to be done with regard to the issue of the mandatory hijab has already been done. The nightmare of the Islamic regime has already come true, the spell is already broken. The hair is flying, the women are dancing, young people are kissing on the streets of Tehran. It is a beautiful revolution because it stands in sharp contrast to the ugliness that this regime promoted from its inception.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



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