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Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in Iran

by Shirin Assa

Abstract: In the wake of the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a powerful image emerged: women in Iran defiantly casting aside their hijabs and rallying under the slogan of "Woman, Life, Freedom." This paper explores and reflects upon what I call, following Verónica Gago, a feminist strike in Iran that organizes disorderly and cross-sectoral withdrawals of women from structures that exploit and assault them and restores their bargaining power and agency. Through the analytical perspective of intersectionality, this paper inquires into how the political underpinnings of the gendered apparatus in the Islamic regime of Iran have propelled the imagination of a common body among the diverse array of women. Further, it scrutinizes how the #WomanLifeFreedom uprising unveils a feminist strike and what it entails. This paper aims to show how the feminist strike in Iran expands the notion of strike as a tool against the conditions of work and showcases its all-encompassing basis against living conditions and restrictions on freedom.

Keywords: femicide machine; feminist strike; Iran; unveiling; veiling; "Woman, Life, Freedom"

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Introduction

The #WomanLifeFreedom revolutionary uprising in Iran was sparked by the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini on September 16, 2022. A 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Jina, died in the custody of the Guidance Patrol for not *properly* complying with the state-imposed mandatory veiling. People started to #SayHerName: #Mahsa_Amini #Jina_Amini, as pictures of her lifeless body lying on a hospital bed went viral. At her funeral, women chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" (Woman, Life, Freedom) and spontaneously removed their headscarves, which resonated with many in Iran. More women joined in taking off their hijabs, cutting their hair, and burning their headscarves in mourning and fury. This awakened gender consciousness and feelings in millions, as if by an electric shock, and soon morphed into force that brought masses of people into the streets to chant "Woman, Life, Freedom," attempting to topple the Islamic Republic regime of Iran.

Unveiling and chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom" have symbolized the ongoing resistance of women in Iran's current insurgency. Having centralized women's rights amidst all demands, their resistance has become the prominent oppositional force against one of the most authoritarian states, leaving it desperate to recover power. Pervasive, decentered, and situated, the ongoing insubordination of women is what I call a feminist strike in Iran, following Verónica Gago's concept of feminist strike. According to Gago, feminist strike organizes disorderly and cross-sectoral withdrawals of women from structures that exploit and assault them and restores their bargaining power and agency (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018).

The collective act of strike, as conceptualized by Verónica Gago, presents a potent response to the political violence aimed at negating women's agency (2018, 662). It extends beyond conventional notions of labor strikes, encompassing a wide array of actions that address the conditions of living, surpassing the confines of work. The feminist strike emerges as a transformative force, seeking to dismantle systems of sexist oppression and envisioning a new relationship between bodies, territories, and feminist internationalism. According to Gago, "a feminist strike […] creates a new notion of what it means to strike based on expanding what we recognize as work, and a feminist internationalism that creates a new notion of how we define the relationship between bodies and territories and the relations between one territory and another" (2020, vii).

The history of women's struggles reveals their political marginalization, despite multiple institutions extensively capitalizing on their bodies and labor (Federici 2021). This multifaceted subjugation is perpetuated through a complex array of apparatuses, which systematically normalize coercion and naturalize exploitation (Segato 2003). These converge and co-construct common precarity for women and materialize differently in their lives (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020).

A recent report based on the official statistics spanning 2021 to 2023 reveals that, on average, every four days, a woman in Iran tragically loses her life at the hands of men (Lotfi 2023). The primary perpetrators are husbands, followed by distant male family members, such as ex-husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons (Lotfi 2023). What is particularly striking is how the causes of these murders are attributed. The report identifies family conflicts as the primary reason in 87 cases, with honor killings accounting for 38 cases. Notably, 30 cases remain categorized as unidentified causes, while financial reasons are cited in 10 cases. This unsettling pattern primarily accounts for the depoliticization of these systematic murders by the state in official records, often viewed as instances and incidents. Against this backdrop, politicizing women's oppression and exploitation is the basis upon which a feminist notion of strike can be imagined.

Through the analytical perspective of intersectionality, this paper inquires into how the political underpinnings of the gendered apparatus in the Islamic regime of Iran have propelled the imagination of a common body among the diverse array of women. Further, it scrutinizes how the #WomanLifeFreedom uprising unveils a feminist strike and what it entails.

This paper provides an interpretive and analytical framework for understanding the defiant act of unveiling in Iran as a feminist strike that beckons a revolution in the name of Woman, Life, and Freedom. The first section discusses the intersectional struggles of women in Iran by invoking Sergio González Rodríguez's model of the "femicide machine" (2012), which directs attention to the political underpinnings of veiling and the entanglement of gendered public spaces, criminalization of women's autonomy, and exploitation of their care and reproductive labors. Second, the paper analyzes the roots and routes of a political consciousness that has come to mold Iran's feminist strike and thrust forward a revolutionary pathway for people.

The history of women's resistance to compulsory veiling in Iran dates back to Tāhira Qurrat al-Ayn, with a continuous struggle since 1848. This paper does not engage in the historiography of unveiling but instead emphasizes the political histories that centralize compulsory veiling as a juncture for the resistance of women in Iran. While this paper primarily centers on Kurdish women's movements, it is crucial to note that this focus does not seek to dominate the discourse on ethnic feminist movements or downplay the pivotal roles of other ethnic women's movements during the Woman Life Freedom uprising. Rather, the primary intention here is to examine the *intersectionality of women's struggles*, i.e., the links between multiple precarities. A thorough engagement with women's diverse positionality and experiences of violence and abuse also stays out of scope. The timely issue of transnational solidarity across the spectrum of Muslim women's agencies is a central focus of my forthcoming paper, warranting its own dedicated space.

The Building of the Femicide Machine in Iran

González Rodríguez (2012) identifies the brutal murders of women in Juárez, Mexico, to result from systemic violence fueled by intertwined economic and political structures. He employs the metaphor of a machine to depict "an apparatus that not only facilitated the murders of numerous women and girls but also established institutions that ensured impunity for these crimes and even legalized them" (2012, 7). While initially rooted in Juárez, González Rodríguez cautions that

similar femicide machines may be emerging worldwide (2012, 14).

A complex net of politics has always been growing against women's bodies and labor. Yet, the politicization of their struggle is never a given. Notably, women of the global south can hardly escape the intricately culturalized maze that confines them and that they must navigate before arriving at its deferred political core. As Spivak argues, "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (1994, 102).

This is illustrated by the state agendas on the Islamic veil across Europe, notably the recent ban on female students wearing abayas in France (Goksedef 2023). These agendas result from a history of radical measures against Muslim women and their communities.

However, perhaps the example par excellence would be Iran's case, which, in less than half a century, drastically shifted from compulsory laws on unveiling women (1936) to veiling them entirely (1979), solely as a result of a change in the state's regime. Therefore, the issue of veiling and the associated dilemmas in the East, West, or diasporas, appears subsidiary to the politics of modern nation-states and their relations (Bilge 2010; Rashid 2023). The essentialism of culture or the reduction of agency to "a (universal) property of (transcendental) individuals" renders both the struggles and resistance invisible (Bilge 2010, 24; Narayan 1998).

The act of unveiling women in Iran, a globally contentious expression of self-determination, represents an agency molded by historical possibilities (Asad 1996; Rostam-Kolayi and Matin-Asgari 2014). The politicization of women's bodies in contemporary Iran traces back to Reza Shah (1925–41) who aimed to modernize and homogenize the country through coercive practices, including the unveiling of women (Najmabadi 2016). The Islamization of Iran after the revolution (1978–79) similarly instrumentalized women's bodies, justifying extensive coercion as a response to the previous regime and Western influences. Women's rights were frequently curtailed during times of political crisis to reassert control and divert attention. The oppression of women was not an isolated issue but rather indicated a broader deterioration of human rights and living conditions.

The systematic victimization of women in Iran, which was significantly aggravated after the revolution, operates on three levels: (1) gendering public spaces, (2) criminalizing women, trans, queer, and non-binary peoples' autonomy, and (3) exploiting women's care and reproductive labor. The suspension of the Family Protection Act (FPA) marked the beginning of a series of assaults against women. This act was the legal legacy of previous generations of women's activists who had worked to shift women's rights and family laws from Shari'ah courts to family courts. This suspension occurred on February 26, 1979. Additionally, on March 3, 1979, women judges were removed from their positions. Notably, on March 6 of the same year, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a compulsory veiling decree. Collectively, these events set in motion Iran's femicide machine immediately after the revolution. These actions consolidated power within the Shi'i clergy, transforming public spaces into ideological checkpoints, perpetuating the cycle of gender oppression, and entrenched a complex and outright system of violence against women.

Gendering Public Spaces: The Launch of Gender Apartheid

On March 6, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree that marked the inception of Iran's gender apartheid. This decree mandated that women could not enter or work in government offices without wearing hijabs (Matin and Mohajer 2013; Moghissi 2016; Nategh 1986). Behind his fervent anti-Shah and anti-imperial rhetoric for independence, Khomeini aimed to regain the power of Shi'i clergy in the post-revolution turmoil. This move catalyzed the Islamization of the state, rallying a politically divided nation around patriarchal traditions and religiosity (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023; Sedghi 2007; Paidar 1997). In doing this, the public spaces effectively turned into ideological checkpoints.

The gendering of public spaces had far-reaching consequences, obstructing women's participation in formal labor and perpetuating generational feminized poverty. Since the summer of 1980 (Tabasi 2019), women were compelled to surrender bodily autonomy in exchange for the right to work, but this exchange came at a cost as they were effectively removed from formal labor markets, exacerbating gender discrimination and financial disenfranchisement (Afshar 1997).

The manifestation of the rising Islamic ideology and its assaults on public space had its roots in early February

1979 and in the heart-wrenching burning of Shahre-No, traditionally Tehran's red-light district on the fringes of the city. Within its confines, approximately 1,500 women in Shahre-No were employed and worked as sex workers until the provocation of Islamic sentiments at the onset of the revolution set it on fire. During the rise of Islamic forces, these women faced the horrors of being burned, beaten, imprisoned, and even subjected to execution while others were coerced into (public) acts of repentance.

Furthermore, the impact of the gender apartheid regime extended beyond spatial dimension and discrimination against women. It touched the lives of LGBTQIA+, as the state imposed strict dress codes and enforced veiling while simultaneously offering state-sponsored gender reassignment surgery for trans people and prohibiting homosexuality for queers. This seeming contradiction was part of a broader strategy to reconstruct and re-arrange bodies within binaries of space, gender, and sexuality. Thus, it divided society into cisgender and heteronormative men versus others. It all served to reinforce the regime's grip on public morality and maintain control over the public imagination (Najmabadi 2011).

Amid mass executions of political dissidents in the 1980s, veiling became mandatory by law in 1983, with penalties introduced for noncompliance (Sedghi 2007). Under the successive leadership of Ali Khamenei (1989–), veiling remained a steadfast policy across different administrations (Randjbar-Daemi 2017). However, mandatory veiling's function as a basis for gender segregation evolved into an apartheid regime, particularly during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and since the beginning of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97) (Shahrokni 2020). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed presidency (2005–13) introduced the "Morality Police" (Gasht-e-Ershad), an update on the Islamic Revolution Committees (1979–91), ushering in a new era of policing public spaces and women's bodies (Afary 2009). His tenure witnessed a violent and widespread assault on women who had reemerged in social spaces following the expansion of civil society during his predecessor, Mohammadreza Khatami (1997–2004) (Alikarami 2019). As subsequent administrations faced aggressive economic decline, new surveillance methods such as facial recognition in private cars, social media monitoring, and fines were implemented, culminating in the Ebrahim Raisi administration (2021–). Mandatory veiling laws since 1983 have played a pivotal role in controlling women's political activism and participation in civil society, often serving as legal grounds for their mistreatment, imprisonment, intimidation, and acts of violence against them (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Conversely, mandatory veiling has also become a point of juncture for women's resistance, encompassing struggles for self-determination among ethnic, migrant, and religious minorities and individuals across the gender spectrum. As such, veiling in Iran materializes women's oppression.

Criminalizing Women, Trans, Queer, and Nonbinary Peoples' Autonomy: The Legalization of Heteropatriarchy

During the "White Revolution" led by Mohammadreza Shah in 1963, the Family Protection Act (FPA) was introduced as part of the modernization project, aiming to integrate Western norms into Iranian society. Initially proposed in 1967 and revised in 1975, this law faced opposition from clerics who were already against women's suffrage (Randjbar-Daemi 2022). The act sought to transfer family matters, such as marriage, divorce, and custody, from Shari'ah courts to newly established family protection courts, which would limit clerical power and impose restrictions on marriage age and polygamy (Paidar 1997; Aghajanian 1991). However, as long as the legislative politics accommodate the state's politics, they remain embedded in class, gender, and racial/ethnic structures (Davis 1983; Crenshaw 2018; Sedghi 2007). FPA revoked exclusive men's rights in family matters, although its implementation largely favored urban and economically privileged women, remaining a top-down initiative (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Sanasarian 1982).

Following the revolution, the FPA was suspended. On March 1, 1979, Iran's syndicate of female jurists wrote a letter to the emerging government. Although they had initially planned to further women's rights, encompassing economic and political dimensions, their letter primarily underscored the general importance of improving women's condition of living (Hosseinkhah 2018) without mentioning their agenda for the future or alluding to the suspension of the FPA a few days prior. In response to their letter, Ayatollah Khomeini promptly revoked women's right to serve as judges (Sedghi 2007). With men assuming complete control over the legal sphere and gender politics, the prospects for women's rights began to decline significantly (Afary 2009; Moghissi 2016). More than a mere retaliation, the suspension was, in fact, the reconquest of the private do-

main by Shi'i clergy. The new Islamic family legislation, signed into law in October 1979, reinstated unilateral men's rights while further eroding women's personal rights and social entitlements (Alikarami 2019; Afary 2009). This included the repeal of abortion rights, prohibition of contraception, lowering the marriage age for women to 9, and delegating various rights such as work, travel, custody, divorce, and marriage to husbands and male family members (Moghissi 2016).

The Qesās Law (1980–83), also known as the Bill of Retribution, was a highly contentious legal tactic to Islamize the post-revolution state (Alikarami 2019). Khomeini declared that the bill adheres to the writ of the Quran and hence is God's law, giving a warning to its many opponents ("The Consequences" 1981). This law reduced the legal worth of a woman to half that of a man. Further, it restricted women's legal rights by devaluing their testimony which served deadly in cases involving death sentences, such as adultery (Sedghi 2007). The Qesās Law not only affected inheritance and wealth distribution but also introduced severe punishments, such as lashings and stoning, for transgressors who refused to adhere to the state-imposed dress code (Poya 2010; Sedghi 2007). The law was an unequal system where killing a man was considered a capital crime while killing a woman was considered a less serious offense that could be compensated by paying blood money to descendants and legal guardians (Afshar 1997). The Qesās Law has been used to criminalize dissent, agency, and autonomy, mainly targeting women and religious, ethnic, and gender/sexuality marginalized groups.

The legalization of patriarchy in Iran has drastically reinforced heteronormativity. In November 2021, Ebrahim Raisi enacted the Bill of Protection of the Family and the Rejuvenation of the Population, which incentivizes childbearing through financial support packages (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). This has led to increased child marriages due to rising poverty rates. Contraception has been forcefully removed from the market. Abortion is illegal and carries severe punishments for individuals and places that enable or facilitate it, making it either too expensive or fatal. The reconstitution of legal spheres has resulted in impunity for violence against women, queer, and trans individuals, even in extreme cases such as femicide, rape, and child (sexual) abuse. The law has promoted and perpetuated a widespread culture of precarity. At the intersection of Islamic family legislation and the Qesās Law, men serve as the state administrators in the family by constraining women to domestic spaces and acting as their guardians (Alikarami 2019). The extreme disparity between men's and women's rights has turned families into battlegrounds, intensifying the oppression faced by women, and LGBTQIA+ people (Hajnasiri et al. 2016; Saffari et al. 2017; Moghissi 2016; Afary 2009). The legalization of heteropatriarchy has not only regulated victims' positions but also made it nearly impossible for them to hold aggressors accountable, exacerbating the cycle of violence and oppression (Alikarami 2019). In this context, in the words of Sedghi: "Law is politics by another name" (2007, 135).

Exploiting Care and Reproductive Labor: A Case of Domestic Slavery

Building upon Rita Segato's perspective, Gago emphasizes examining women's precarity as political crimes rather than mere cultural conditions or sexually motivated acts (2018, 661). These crimes are the direct consequences of the state's systematic order (Segato 2003). This approach seeks to understand commonalities amidst differences. She writes this is "to understand something that speaks to all of us [...]. Because something of that geography is replicated […]. It is the composition of a common body that produces a type of resonance and result: a politics that makes the body of one woman the body of all" (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018, 661). Consequently, femicidal crimes intertwine public and private spaces, intersecting different forms of exploitation, violence, and economic disenfranchisement (Gago and Mason-Deese 2018; Federici 2021).

The Islamic regime in Iran has implemented various state-sponsored measures to increase fertility rates and regulate reproduction, considering it inextricable for its economic and political power. Traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals of the family have been propagated through the dominance of Shi'i–Islamic values, particularly in the educational system, relegating women to the roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers while erasing homosexuality (Naeimi and Kjaran 2022). The concern over expanding the Shi'i population has been present among clerics even before the revolution, but it gained significant political attention in Iran after 2000 (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Motherhood, as a romantically feminized teleology, has long been respected in Iranian society. However, since the Iran–Iraq war, motherhood has become a preoccupation for Iran's leaders and is particularly valued when it contributes to ideological allies for the state or the growth of the Shi'i population (Afshar

1997). Consequently, women's labor has been recognized primarily for the services they provide to men, God, and the state and their bodies are regulated for value extraction, "compatible with capitalist social relations prevailing in Iran" (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023, 8).

Having been advocated as *raison d'être* and divine duty, social reproduction and care labor remained unpaid. Even with a shortage of male labor after the war, women's labor contribution was unwanted and marginalized (Afshar 1997). Gender segregation in workplaces pushed women to the margins of labor sectors (Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011). Despite their high participation in agricultural sectors, women's work remained invisible, and official attempts were made to minimize their participation in formal economic sectors (Moghadam 2009). Whereas the number of educated women has risen exponentially since the revolution, their social and legal restrictions led to defeminizing economic sectors and, in turn, heavily feminize informal and domestic labor units, as well as care labor professions in general, such as teaching or nursing (Farvardin 2020).

At the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal social relations, the exploitation of women's labor has an economic and psychological aspect to it (hooks 2015). In capitalist patriarchy, women's economic empowerment is class continuous and reinforces the exploitation of underprivileged groups. The low-paid or unpaid nature of women's work assigns a lower value to their labor, dehumanizing and endangering them within the system (hooks 2015). While the lack of job opportunities facilitates the exploitation of women's sexuality and labor, it is crucial to shift attention to the broader context in which the economic exploitation of women emegerges.

The institutionalization of poverty in Iran, influenced by increasing class and gender conflicts, has made poverty a common experience among various groups of women. The "feminization of poverty," or the impoverishment of women, disproportionately affects ethnic minorities, migrant women, and nonbinary individuals in Iran (Ehrenreich and Stallard 1982). These groups engage in extremely low-paid and often degrading work, enduring precarious working conditions (AleAhmad 2023; Karamouzian et al. 2016; Hoodfar 2004). Poverty is widespread among women and is a common source of precarity, pushing rural women to migrate to larger cities and work as caregivers in middle and upper-class families. Their labor is poorly paid, menial, and often perpetuates "ethnicized forms of structural violence" (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023, 8). In response to the economic hardships women face in Iran, different groups have examined the impact of their social and legal rights and the effects of marriage and divorce on their impoverishment. This struggle against poverty has fostered solidarity among women from various ideological, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Bahramitash 2014).

The political underpinning of veiling in Iran delineates a femicide machine within the authoritative Islamic regime. Mandatory veiling serves as the starting point for the subsequent control over women's bodies, agency, the exploitation of feminized labor, and the perpetuation of violence and feminized poverty. The mandatory act of veiling and the control over women's bodies function as crucial components within Iran's femicide machine, employed as an axis for the state's radicalization.

Figure 1:† Graffiti stating: "Femicide by The Law of God, State, And Father." Shared on: https://bidarzani.com/30718/

Feminist Strike: Woman, Life, Freedom

The systematic victimization of women has constituted a common body among women in Iran, and Jina's (Mahsa's) death has animated this body. The uprising of Woman, Life, Freedom has transformed everyday social life into the time and the place for unwavering protests, occurring in universities, offices, public events, bazaars, cafés, restaurants, streets, and public transportation. Powerful images have emerged of individuals defiantly setting their scarves on fire, symbolizing courage and resistance. The chant "We Are All Mahsa, Come on and Fight" echoes through the streets as the writing on the wall reads, "Courage Can be Propagated."

Elderly veiled and unveiled women fearlessly confront counter-insurgency forces, reclaiming public spaces and generating feelings of safety and care. Their presence serves as a reminder of intergenerational solidarity and an extension of the home. The display of the schoolgirls' defiance and the government's violent response has been an emotionally devastating sight, exposing the failure of state propaganda. Funeral sermons have shifted their focus to the chant of "Woman, Life, Freedom," inspiring individuals to fight for justice rather than succumb to victimhood. The streets have witnessed protests echoing with the collective voice of women saying, "Cannons, Tanks, and Guns Won't Work Anymore, Tell My Mother She Doesn't Have a Daughter." Women from all walks of life, veiled and unveiled, stand side by side, celebrating solidarity, love, and joy, reclaiming their bodies and rejecting shame. Graffiti on walls proudly proclaims, "No Matter How Much You Try to Harm Me, I Will Not be Wounded; I Will Keep Sprouting."

The state's relentless crackdown on women's bodies and lands has exposed the gruesome reality of the femicide machine. Women have been targeted with direct shots to their genitals, heads, necks, and faces, resulting in loss of life and eyesight (Parent and Habibiazad 2023; Amnesty International 2022; Ghorbani 2022; Wintour and Foumani 2022). Among the victims are children who witnessed their mother's death and mothers who mourn their children (Wintour 2023; Dehghanpisheh 2022; BBC 2022). Bodies of women have been found, slaughtered during the protests, including nurses and doctors who provided secret assistance (Safi 2022; Daneshgari 2023). Women have been brutally beaten, pushed from buildings, unlawfully arrested, and faced mental and physical torture in detention centers and prisons. Reports indicate widespread sexual molestation and rape (Qiblawi et al. 2022). Chemical attacks, primarily targeting girls' schools, have been employed to spread fear (Parent 2023a). Veiling laws have been reinforced through severe sanctions, summoning individuals to comply and reinforce them.

Most recently, the Iranian state has pushed for drastic punitive measures to control women's large-scale noncompliance with the state's dress code. The proposed Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, currently under review in the Iranian parliament, seeks to legalize the detention and incarceration of women, impose substantial financial penalties on them and the establishments they frequent, and threaten closures. Underaged girls face potential passport confiscation and denial of their rights to education and work. In defiance, protesters question, "You kill, you arrest, you beat; what would you do with the regeneration (of resistance)?" This oft-quoted verse encapsulates the determination and the significant involvement of Generation Z in this uprising and the reminder of transgenerational and continuous resistance (Shams and Gott 2023; Tohidi 2023; Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi 2023).

Women in Iran continue to organize informally and persist in forming solidarity coalitions, exchanging small gestures of support and encouragement in public spaces. By amplifying previously unheard voices, they establish grassroots and interpersonal networks rooted in intersectional sisterhood and resonances. Asef Bayat conceptualizes women's activism in Islamic authoritarian states as a "non-movement" distinct from traditional organizational and networking methods, as well as mobilization tactics such as street marches, picketing, strikes, or disruptions, yet it effectively expands their range of choices (2007, 160). Compared to other strikes, the feminist strike has achieved greater success in maintaining daily life and orchestrating widespread acts of sabotage (Bayat 2023; Jafari 2023; Tohidi 2023). One particularly striking moment in this uprising is the outright declaration of support for the feminist movement by men, especially those from working-class, ethnic, and different religious backgrounds (Tohidi 2023; Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi 2023). These men challenge and reject the state-imposed gender stereotypes, reclaiming their autonomy against their portrayal as having no control over their sexual desires. This is exemplified by the chant in which men address morally corrupt authorities, especially male figures in power, saying: "You Are Lewd, You Are Dissolute," while women's voices complement it saying: "I Am A Free Woman." This signifies that the feminist strike has also formed diagonal and unexpected coalitions. Thus, the movement extends beyond isolated circumstances, connecting various fields, lands, and marginalized groups. Among the slogans, there are: "Kurdistan, The Graveyard of Fascists," "From Zahedan to Tehran, I Sacrifice Myself for Iran," "Bread, Labor, Freedom, Council Government," and "Kurdistan, a Role Model for Iran." These attest to the lateral coalitions and the shared understanding of intersectional resistance.

Refusing to be mere victims, women in Iran assert their agency and position a "relational essence" (Zack 2005, 8) between themselves, which not only brings educated, poor, devout and veiling women together, but also transcends hegemonic values, showcasing how commonalit-

ies bridge differences (Hancock 2016; Yuval-Davis 1997). Openly defying state authorities and the patriarchal legal order, women express contempt for norms advocated as divine law. They reject prescribed roles, connecting their waged and unwaged labors to make them visible, meaningful, and non-hierarchal. Feminist strike laterally connects homemakers, workers, migrants, rural women, students, professionals, and activists from diverse backgrounds. Beyond their individual predicaments, they confront precarity in various fields. As connections form daily, a broader resistance emerges, envisioning mass sabotage. This growing counter-power holds the potential to halt the femicide machine that sustains the Islamic regime, becoming the harbinger of a revolution. Borrowing from Gago, the Woman, Life, Freedom feminist strike in Iran, similar to other international feminist strikes, namely #NiUnaMenos, "showed the potential of an action that allowed us to go from mourning to taking our rage to the streets. […] We came together based on our doing, and in our multiplicity we became accessible as a common ground"(2020, 10).

Figure 2.† The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" written by a Baluch woman. Shared on: https://x.com/Mehrnaz_Mjt/status/1587653396768600064?s=20

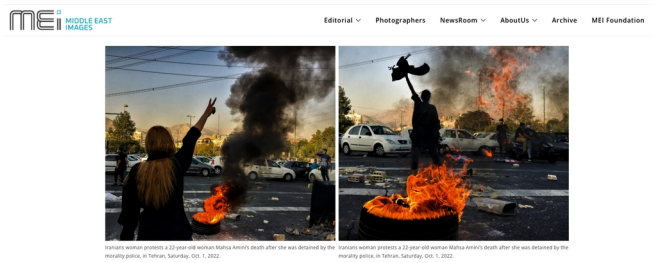

Figure 3.† The act of defiance by women in Tehran during the 2022 uprising. Shared on: Middle East Images

Figure 4.† Two Kurdish girls, dressed in their chosen ethnic attire, symbolizing "Woman, Life, Freedom" in the protest in the city of Mahabad, on November 18, 2022. Shared by: https://x.com/NatalieAmiri/status/1593678929801379842?s=20

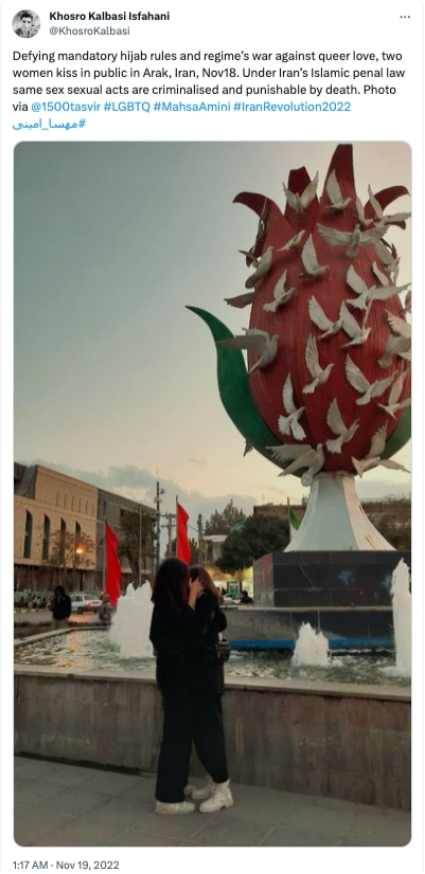

Figure 5.† Resistance against compulsory hijab regulations and the government's crackdown on LGBTQ+ relationships, two women publicly share a kiss in Arak, Iran, in November 2020. Shared on: https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211185879

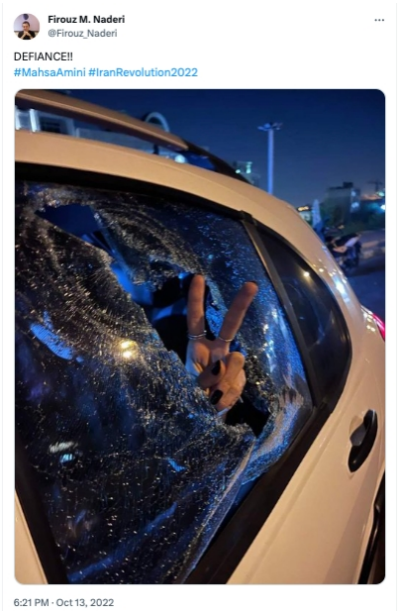

Figure 6.† "No Matter How Much You Try to Harm Me, I Will Not be Wounded; I Will Keep Sprouting." Shared on: https://9gag.com/gag/aGEwrQw?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=post_share

Figure 7.† Amidst a series of chemical attacks on girls' schools, a student defiantly holds a sign reading, "'Woman, Life, Freedom' Until My Last Breath." March 4, 2023. Shared on: https://x.com/1500tasvir_en/status/1632061803063640064?s=20

Figure 8.† Several university students entering Al Zahra University without mandatory hijab, Tehran, April 2023. Shared on: https://x.com/1500tasvir_en/status/1645410408453292034?s=20

Unveiling the Process

Jina was a young Kurdish woman from Saqqez who was killed in Tehran by the Islamic state's police for not *properly* wearing her hijab. What distinguishes Jina's death from other femicides and the countless killings and executions of Kurds and ethnic minorities in Iran is the profound politicization surrounding her untimely demise. Politicization was made possible by a dialectical process intertwining the longstanding political subjectivity of women in Rojhalat and the intersectional feminist practices within Iran.

Jina's body and death converge with the history of systematic gender and ethnic oppression in Iran. The ethnic oppression of Rojhilat, the Kurdish region in Iran, dates back to the time of Reza Shah and persisted under the Islamic Republic regime, despite differences in their political systems (Cronin 2010; 1997; Cabi 2020). According to Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Kurdish oppression is based on three pillars: the unification of diverse territories of Iran, the centralization and industrialization of the country, and the homogenization of Iran under the Islamic state (2023). It is important to note that the Kurdish people have a long history of resistance shaped by their transnational struggles for self-determination against totalitarian states in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. While it is not possible to delve into the entire history of Kurdish resistance in this limited space, it is pertinent to address the resistance of Kurdish women as it relates to the provenance of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" and the development of solidarity beyond Bakur, Başur, Rojava, and Rojhilat.

Kurdish women did not have the same opportunities as Kurdish men. While for both Kurdish men and women entry into the political realm in Iran was hindered, men took a detour by using their mobility and going to big cities, universities, and work sectors (Karimi 2023). On the other hand, Kurdish women vehemently organized various local, ethnic, political, and gender-based movements, gaining a significant presence in Rojhalat (Qubādī 2015). The Komala, a far-left Kurdish political organization, played a significant role in fostering political awakening among Kurdish women and their political subjectification, as Karimi argues (2022; 2023). Although the first feminist party in Kurdistan dates back to the 1960s, it was the grassroot organizations led by Kurdish women that transformed cities like Sanandaj, Marivan, and Saqqez into centers of women's political engagement (Qubādī 2015; Ghoreishi 2018). The Aichi cemetery, where Jina's funeral took place, is located near these cities. In sharp contrast to what seems a sudden reaction of local women to Jina's death, the unveiling and chanting of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" at the Aichi cemetery throws into sharp relief the spontaneous organizational capacity of Kurdish women rooted in their histories of political agency in Rojhalat and Kurdistan.

The genesis of the slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî," as historicized by Rostampour, finds its roots in its earlier form, "Jin, Jiyan," emerging from the struggles of women within the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) during the late 1980s (2023a). The guerrilla women within the party faced societal pressure to discontinue their involvement, driven by the belief that women should not participate in combat roles. In response, these women demanded immediate action to address this issue and challenge prevailing patriarchal norms within their ethnic community (Rostampour 2023a.). This slogan evolved to become a source of inspiration for Abdullah Öcalan, the charismatic leader of the PKK. Through conversations with co-founder Sakîne Cansiz and other women within the movement, Öcalan conceptualized an inextricable link between the aspirations of Kurdish liberation and women's liberation. In this background, "Jin, Jiyan" evolves into "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî," casting light on the mutual dependency of gender equality and ethnic liberation in Kurdistan (Rostampour 2023a).

In the late 1990s, the Peace Mothers and later the Saturday Mothers adopted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî." Drawing inspiration from the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the Peace Mothers united against the Turkish government's kidnapping and forced disappearance of their children, bringing together Kurdish women in Bakur and Rojava. This resistance led "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" to be embraced on International Women's Day in Turkey since 2006 and in Syria from 2012 onwards (Rostampour 2023a).

In 2014, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" became the prominent slogan in the fight against ISIS, showcasing the courage and power of Kurdish women against brutal and oppressive states in Kobanî, Rojava. Furthermore, at the funerals of political prisoners, such as Heidar Ghorbani in 2021, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" echoed in Rojhalat. Kurdish women rejected the state's dress code, wore Kurdish clothes, positioned themselves at the forefront of the demonstrations, and led the crowd (Ghoreishi 2023). In short, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" encapsulates the trajectory of Kurdish women, transforming from intersectional victims to

transnational warriors, and the inevitable relations between women's rights, conditions of living, and scope of freedom.

Following the announcement of the decree on veiling in 1979, women from various groups protested for six days in large numbers. These women organized the first demonstration against freedom restrictions, driven by the political awakening of the revolution (Matin and Mohajer 2013; Hosseinkhah 2018). However, their protests lacked solidarity and support from religious nationalists, secularists, liberals, leftists, and intellectual groups, who regarded the women's movement as derivative, divisive, unimportant, and secondary. This lack of support and political neutrality towards the suppression of women worked in favor of Islamist groups, leading to violence and the slogan, "Either Headscarf or a Smack on The Head" (Meskoob 2001; Sedghi 2007).

Due to the abrupt announcement of the decree and the lack of prior preparation, there was insufficient time for organizational efforts to extend beyond Tehran, thus limiting the incorporation of other demographics of women across Iran. The ramifications of the forced unveiling during Reza Shah's reign on conservative families were also overlooked. These included girls' withdrawal from schools, secret and overnight trips of veiling women to use public baths, migration to Iraq in some cases, and memories of physical assault and public humiliation, to name a few. These experiences consolidated anti-Shah sentiments and propelled many women to embrace veiling as their disapproval of the Pahlavi regime, ultimately enabling its co-optation by the religious ideology in power (Chehabi 1993).

While veiling was not a mutual predicament for Kurdish women since Rojhalat is dominantly Sunni and their ethnic hair cover is a small piece of cloth called "lachek" (Ghoreishi 2023), they organized a demonstration on March 11, 1979 and immediately called out the anti-democratic nature of the decree (Qubādī 2015). In solidarity with the women's protest in Tehran, women in Sanadaj, amongst them leftist men and people from Saqqez, chanted, "Neither Headscarf Nor a Smack in The Head, (but) Death to This Dictatorship" (Qubādī 2015, 170). It is worth noting that this protest received limited support in Rojhalat, as it occurred just days before the Kurdish population's hope for the new government began to wane. Nonetheless, their intersectional efforts and feminist solidarity, particularly in connection with the protests in Tehran and other major cities, proved instrumental in delaying the enforcement of mandatory hijab legislation for a period of two years.

It is crucial to contextualize this moment within the larger Kurdish struggle for self-determination which was intentionally portrayed as an attempt to achieve separatism from Iran, even though it served as a pretext for the government to open fire on a politically organized ethnic population. While the horrific events of the 1979 Bloody Nawroz in Sine (Sanandaj) are etched into the collective memory of generations of Kurds in Rojhalat, their mass boycott of the referendum for the Islamic Republic and withdrawal of their support surely remain ingrained in the memory of the nascent state (Cabi 2020). This tragic history has led to unremitting state-sponsored violence against the people and land of Rojhalat since 1979. As a consequence of the ethnic suppression, Kurdish women's struggles have been marginalized, with their solidarity and resistance often expected to primarily align with ethnic struggles above gender precarity.

While the One Million Signature Campaign in 2006 aimed to repeal discriminatory laws and involved various groups of women, it had limitations in its scope and impact. This brings to light the need for a broader perspective that takes into account the history of Islamic nationalism and its implications for women at the ethnic, religious, and sexual peripheries in Iran. This campaign involved various groups of women and aimed to collect one million signatures with a grassroots approach. However, the campaign became divided as some of its advocates sought redemption through legal reforms, placed faith in the state and top-down reforms, and directed their attention to the political center of power. All campaign advocates were eventually detained and incarcerated.

The campaign's merits are widely discussed by Afary (2009), Alikarami (2019), and Rivetti (2020), amongst others. Rostampour critically views that the campaign disproportionately consisted of Persian and middle-class women and was limited to the concerns of educated women in urban areas. According to Rostampour, this narrow perspective rendered the campaign irrelevant due to its alignment with Shi'i and nationalist discourses. The One Million Signature Campaign, had it not been banned, could only succeed in centralizing a minor demographic of women before coming close to delivering on its reforms for gender equality. Therefore, Rostampour associates it with "féminisme réformateur centraliste" (centralist reformist feminism), and high-

lights that the proposed reforms could reinforce hierarchical and hegemonic social structures. Consequently, this approach falls short of achieving the political objective of feminism (2023b). The One Million Signature Campaign should have examined the history of Islamic nationalism for the substantial demographic of women at the ethnic, religious, and sexual peripheries. Had they done so, they might have understood how essential it was for women's struggles in Iran to undo its nationalist deeds.

In 2014, Masoumeh (Masih) Alinejad launched the #MyStealthyFreedom campaign from the diaspora. This campaign popularized the act of unveiling as a form of women's civil disobedience and emphasized the secretive nature of women's pursuit of freedom in Iran. However, the campaign drew criticism for its Orientalist imagery and alignment with neoliberal discourses in the West (Seddighi and Tafakori 2016). In 2017, the campaign took a new direction with the introduction of #WhiteWednesdays, encouraging both women and men to protest mandatory veiling by wearing white scarves or clothing. This weekly practice made women's resistance visible, welcomed male participation in the fight against women's oppression, and turned resistance into a regular practice (Shirazi 2019). On December 27, 2017, on Revolution Street (Khiyaban-E-Enghelab), one of the most crowded streets in Tehran, 31-year-old Vida Movahed stood alone on a utility box. She held her headscarf on a stick in silence. People were captivated by her courageous act and called her the Girl of Revolution Street. Her iconic act promoted other women to do the same, and together they have become the Girls of Revolution Street.

The most longstanding grassroots feminist practice in Iran since 1979 happened to be largely neglected for its feminist implications, with only a few notable exceptions (Khosravi Ooryad 2022; Behkish 2022). For several decades, the Mothers and Families of Khavaran (often referred to as Mothers of Khavaran) have played a pivotal role in Iran through their grassroots feminist practices. Inspired by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, they comprised mothers and families of political dissidents who disappeared or were executed by the Islamic regime in the 1980s (*Guardian* 2012; Muhāğir and Davis 2020).

The Mothers of Khavaran gathered at Khavaran, traditionally a burial ground near Tehran for religious minorities, which had been repurposed to bury unidentified bodies of their family members. They deliberately formed a political collective for #Justice-Seeking. As such, Mothers of Khavaran have established a network that transcends generations, including other mourning mothers like Mothers of Laleh Park and Mothers of Aban, who lost their children during Iranian protests between 2017 and 2022. Together, they form the Iranian Justice-Seeking Mothers and have gained unprecedented political significance amongst the people in Iran and massively contributed to their political awakening (Behkish 2022). By relying on grief, empathy, and intimacy as resources for political activism, they displayed the resilience of feminist practice and an informal and intimate organizational possibility. The justice-seeking mothers #دادخواهی. are the epitome of the non-hierarchical and counter-hegemonic feminist collective in Iran that forge solidarities beyond social, national, ideological, religious, and gender borders, connecting one's loss "away from and in relation to others in the world" (Hancock 2016, 126). Moreover, Khosravi Ooryad calls attention to how they reclaimed the role of mothers as political agents and family relations from the patriarchal discourse (2022).

The roots and routes of these feminist movements unveil the processual coalescence of political subjectivities amongst women in Iran. This trajectory not only maps the transnational coalitions of women but also activates the intersectionality of their struggles across generations. By bringing domestic into public and public to domestic, they subvert the hierarchies of labor and waging. Building upon and away from their predicaments, they decentralize and connect in an often indirect and unexpected way. Meanwhile, they are establishing a foundation to articulate the meaning of feminism in Iran, navigating the ambiguities surrounding its usage and claims of ownership. Drawing on Gago, the resistance describes the geography of fear and risk to make sense of their abuse and the pervasiveness of violence. The fear that does not relegate them to victims but instead empowers them to strategize. Therefore, "[i]t is translated into a sensitive map of the exploitation experienced in connection to one another and into formations of other ways of thinking about territory and, in particular, about the body as a territory (body-territory)" (Gago 2018, 663).

Figure 9.† Women's Syndicate of Marivan 1980s. Shared by: https://x.com/Sh_Mouselchi/status/1250513012399669250?s=20

Figure 10.† Mothers and families of Khavaran at Khavaran burial ground. Found as: Courtesy photo: https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-montazeri-comes-back-to-haunt-1988-mass-killings/27975961.html

"Jin, Jiyan, Azadî"

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement reveals the intricate interplay of political and societal dynamics that perpetuate the subordination of women. Within the authoritarian Islamic regime of Iran lies a deeply entrenched and systematic apparatus of violence against women—a femicide machine. This machine employs women's bodies and mandatory veiling as its gears and pins, regulating the state's radicalization. It enforces gendered public spaces, criminalizes women's autonomy, and exploits their care and reproductive labor, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence and feminized poverty.

This paper underscores the evolution of women's protests and resilience throughout Iran's tumultuous history. Women have steadfastly pursued political change, playing pivotal roles in key moments—from the 1979 revolution to the student protests of 1999, and the 2009 Green Movement. The world watched in horror as Neda Agha Soltan bled to death in one of the world's most peaceful protests. Figures like Gohar Eshghi, an "ordinary" elderly woman, emerged as one of the most powerful voices in the justice-seeking movement against the state's atrocious repression of the protestors. Subsequent insurgencies since 2017, sparked primarily by economic grievances and price hikes, or the 2020 anti-government protests following the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, were strongly advocated by women such as Sepideh Qolian, Fatemeh Sepehri, and Bahareh Hedayat, among many. From solitary confinement to hunger strikes, these fearless women have displayed the strength of their voice, bodies, and conviction, to the world and the state.

Building on these collective memories of resilience and suppression, the politicization of Jina Amini's state murder not only marked a turning point— propelling a full-fledged feminist uprising from the ashes left behind by the femicide machine— but also unveiled the intersection of many injustices that extend beyond the realm of gender. Even after a year has elapsed, the strike endures. It persists in disrupting the entrenched hegemonies of heteropatriarchy and poses a formidable challenge for the state, all the while reshaping the ongoing struggle for women's rights in Iran reaching far beyond its borders.

In the wake of Jina's death at the hands of the morality police, the government has taken extensive measures to suppress women's defiance (Amnesty International 2023). After more than four decades of enduring systematic discrimination, violence against women, queer, non-binary, and trans individuals, and the weaponization of public moral against them, the proposed bill for unveiling punishments has compelled United Nations experts to contemplate the notion of gender apartheid in Iran (OHCHR 2023).

Women in Iran firmly reject the role of passive victims (Parent 2023b), shaping their resistance into a feminist strike in its recent phase. The feminist strike in Iran brings together women from diverse backgrounds and social positions, surpassing hegemonic values and forging a decentralized collective. Through their joint en-

deavors, they challenge prescribed gender roles, confront the perils of precariousness across various domains, and envision a mass mobilization capable of sabotaging the femicide machine, ultimately ushering in revolutionary change. Their activism and unwavering resilience epitomize the continuous coalescence of political subjectivities, both within Iran and across transnational coalitions, as they bridge differences and activate intersectionality within their struggles. The recent case of Armita Garavand‡ (#ArmitaGaravand), a 16-year-old girl who is currently in a coma after being assaulted for not wearing a hijab on public transportation, bears a striking resemblance to that of Jina Amini (Wintour and Parent 2023). These women's activism and resilience are levelled at the femicide machine. While their resistance serves as an inspiration and a beacon of hope for a nation, their strike calls on feminist solidarities, not least from the international body of Muslim women.

In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, a strike is "a wide basis against the conditions of work," and the feminist strike in Iran showcases its all-encompassing basis against the conditions of living and the restrictions on freedom (1976, 67). In this light, the resounding slogan of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" acquires its profound significance, encapsulating the essence of their struggle.

Figure 11.† Women, public space, and daily life. The writing on the wall reads: "Woman, Life, Freedom." Shared by: https://x.com/lila2052/status/1645423004245979138?s=20

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Endnotes

† Amidst the current events in Iran's uprising, images shared online often obscure people's faces and the identity of the photographers due to security concerns. The images included in this article are all screenshots of images that have been circulated online through social media to raise awareness about the protests.

‡ As this paper undergoes its final proofreading before publication, it commemorates the solemn 40-day period since Armita Garavand's passing. Throughout her coma, Armita remained under the strict surveillance of the Islamic Republic regime in the hospital, meticulously controlling details and news surrounding her condition and her death to suppress potential uprisings. Her family endured incarceration and threats to remain silent. The striking parallel between the tragic inception and conclusion of this paper serves as a poignant reminder: Even as the femicide machine operates in Iran, resistance perseveres.

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