



## Commentary

*Woman, Life, Freedom: Decoding the feminist uprising in Iran*Hanieh Molana<sup>a,\*</sup>, A. Marie Ranjbar<sup>b,1</sup>, Sahar Razavi<sup>c,1</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, California State University Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA, 95819, United States<sup>b</sup> Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Colorado, 246 UCB, Boulder, CO, 80309, United States<sup>c</sup> Department of Political Science, California State University Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA, 95819, United States

The death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16, 2022 sparked historic anti-government demonstrations in Iran. Following Amini's detention by the "guidance patrols" (commonly referred to as the "morality police") for an alleged dress code violation and her subsequent death, tens of thousands of Iranians from across the country took to the streets to protest the Iranian government's treatment of girls and women. Amini's treatment by the authorities resonated with many Iranians, who saw in her an exemplar of their own families' mistreatment under the government's "moral" codes. The women-led protests have shaken Iranian society. The government has responded brutally with internet blackouts, tear gas, live ammunition, kidnappings, arrests, mass trials, and public executions. Despite the state's violent crackdown, protests have only widened, with coordinated strikes organized by teachers, oil and energy sector workers, merchants, and other groups expressing solidarity with protesters.

Drawing from feminist scholarship on women's rights and social movements in the Middle East, this commentary aims to contribute to the discussion on female bodies as a geopolitical site of violence in Muslim-majority countries, situated within the ongoing *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement in Iran (Schenck et al., 2022). In this piece, we aim to: 1) analyze the feminist uprising in relation to previous waves of anti-government mass protests; 2) situate the uprising's complexity within decades of systematic social, political, and economic grievances; and 3) unsettle dominant accounts of the protests in US media by elucidating ongoing struggles against gendered state violence. We also build on recent interventions in *Political Geography*, specifically within the Virtual Forum on the War in Ukraine, which have important parallels to portrayals of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement in the US. At a moment when Iranian protesters are calling for revolutionary change, we are similarly attentive to how US media coverage of conflicts often erases historical and socio-political complexities by flattening heterogeneities and proffering orientalist discourses (Dubrova, 2022). As feminist scholars, we are wary of how symbols of Iranian women's

resistance are uncritically adopted or appropriated in the name of solidarity (Militz et al., 2022) and strongly warn against the weaponization of resistance in order to promote interventionist logic and imperial agendas (Dubrova, 2022; Megoran, 2022).

The protests following Amini's death must be situated within a longer history of Middle Eastern women's political activism and the fight for bodily autonomy. Iranian girls' and women's bodies have long been a battleground for various Iranian governments' political and nationalist agendas, which are rooted in a longer history of state-enforced un/veiling in pre- and post-revolution Iran. For example, Reza Shah Pahlavi legislated the Unveiling Act in 1936, which forced women to unveil in public spaces under threat of arrest. Although Reza Shah's stated purpose was to integrate women into public life, many women who chose to veil did not leave their houses to avoid humiliating confrontations with the police (Hoodfar, 1993). The post-revolution 1979 hijab ruling and the 1983 Veiling Act required women to wear hijab in public spaces or risk fines, detention, and corporal punishment (Cronin, 2003, pp. 1921–1941). Importantly, both the 1936 Unveiling Act and the 1983 Veiling Act left Iranian women bereft of choice, empowering state surveillance of women's clothing to curtail bodily autonomy. In both cases, these acts disciplined women's bodies using ideological discourses of women's clothing, which alternately represented Iran as a secular, Westernized nation or as an Islamic, anti-imperialist state (Moallem, 2005; Naghibi, 2007; Razavi, 2022).

The *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement builds on longstanding Iranian women's activism including more recent movements against compulsory hijab, such as the *Girls of Revolution Street* protests in 2018 (Ranjbar, 2021). However, this political moment is also unique with regard to its scale, global visibility, apparent leaderlessness, and the level of social and political awareness among the younger generation in Iran. While Iranian women have always been at the forefront of political activism, this is the first time that mass protests focus on the centrality of women's rights. This is exemplified by the Kurdish chant "Woman, Life, Freedom,

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” and other women-centered protest chants that include, “I will kill, I will kill, whoever killed my sister,” and “From Kurdistan to Tehran, oppression against women.” This uprising is also the largest in scale since the 1979 Revolution, spanning urban and rural areas (including regime stronghold cities like Qom and Mashhad) and numerous ethnic minority regions, such as Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchistan. To this end, the protests are intersectional, with protesters attentive to state surveillance and police brutality along dimensions of gender, age, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and geography.

This uprising is led by Generation Z, which has no memory of the 1979 Revolution or the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Over sixty percent of Iranians are under the age of thirty and the average age of protesters is 25. Alarming, the average age of arrested protesters is under the age of twenty, reflecting the government’s crackdown at schools and universities (Foreign Policy, 2022). Unlike previous political movements focused on reform of government institutions, such as demands for electoral change during the 2009 *Green Movement*, Iranians are now making revolutionary demands for radical change and envisioning new political futures beyond the Islamic Republic. Moreover, unlike the many protests that have roiled the social and political landscape of contemporary Iran, there is no organized leadership behind the present demonstrations. Instead, protests are organized and facilitated by word of mouth and through social media channels run by disparate groups across different sectors of society.

Uprisings against the Islamic Republic have increased in recent years, including five major nationwide protests between 2017 and 2021. While previous waves of demonstrations received scant attention from US media, there has been a strikingly vocal international response from social justice advocates, political figures, feminist icons, and the general public expressing solidarity. Images and videos circulated through social media from *within* Iran attest to the bravery of girls and women demanding revolutionary change. These demonstrations are not erupting solely from resistance to compulsory hijab, but rather decades of intersectional organizing against the confluence of gender injustice, economic precarity, and socio-political grievances, with women at the vanguard, fighting for the most basic of human rights.

Despite growing global awareness of the ongoing *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, US media outlets rarely fail to feed into the orientalist image of Middle Eastern women. For example, a recent article in *The Economist* describes protesters burning hijab as “gazelles crossing a river infested with crocodiles. Riot police may pick off many of them, they admit, but the herd will reach salvation. They will bait the regime and its security forces by dancing, baring their hair and torching the ubiquitous posters of the reigning ayatollahs and generals” (Economist, 2022). Exoticizing Middle Eastern women is certainly not a new phenomenon and US media coverage of Iranian protesters often reifies oversimplified tropes of women’s oppression through the veil (Bagheri, 2019; Abu Lughod, 2015; Arjana, 2015; Haji Molana, 2019). Iranian feminist scholars have elucidated how the US media portrays social movements led by women in Iran through the lens of Western liberal feminism (Mojab, 2001; Naghibi, 2007). Given the dominant narratives characterizing media coverage, we urge caution against simplistic explanations of this feminist uprising, which are devoid of historical and socio-political context.

One example of this tendency can be seen in reporting that follows reductive interpretations of the role of Amini’s Kurdish identity in her experience of being targeted by the Guidance Patrol. It is critical to center Amini’s Kurdish identity given the historical and ongoing socio-political oppression and marginalization of Kurds in Iran while also showing respect to activists who have long called attention to this erasure. However, in the reporting on the current wave of unrest, there has been a relative lack of context provided for media deference to activists’ warnings not to contribute to the marginalization of Kurdish identity. Without the necessary framing, this reporting can create an impression that Amini was targeted by the Guidance Patrol for being Kurdish and that her experience is distinct from the coercive control that

women across Iran face on a daily basis. The widespread nature of the demonstrations, which have spanned regions and sectors of society that have rarely participated in political protests in post-revolutionary Iran, reveals the breadth of the proportion of the Iranian population relating to Amini’s experience. In this case, the tendency of US audiences to view social and political conflict in ethno-national terms (Muller, 2008; Scherter & Woods, 2022) obscures the universality of Iranian women’s struggles with coercive apparatuses deployed by the state to surveil and police female bodies in the public sphere.

As of this writing, the movement has reached its fourth month and is unprecedented in terms of global solidarity. The Iranian diaspora has organized mass protests in major cities like Washington DC, London, and Berlin, eliciting messages of sympathy and direct engagement by non-Iranians alike. Protesters have demanded that the international community hold the Iranian regime accountable for human rights violations, with efforts including the establishment of a UN Human Rights Commission investigation and the December 2022 expulsion of Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In addition, the US has paused nuclear deal negotiations with Iran and initiated targeted sanctions against government officials in response to the Iranian government’s violent attempts to suppress the anti-regime protests.

This political juncture raises a critical question: *What does feminist transnational solidarity look like in this moment?* It is critical to keep the global spotlight on the Iranian state, which continues to respond with brutality against protesters, including sexual violence, disappearances, and executions of those involved in the uprising. It is vitally important to amplify the voices of protesters while simultaneously recognizing the centrality of marginalized identities in the struggle for liberation in Iran, including Kurdish Iranian girls and women who have been at the forefront of this intersectional feminist movement. Those who are already rendered vulnerable by institutional and systematic marginalization are disproportionately impacted by state repression. It is therefore necessary that their experiences be centered in support of a greater understanding of the global fight for women’s freedom and bodily autonomy.

As feminist scholars working and living outside of Iran, we are deeply aware of the limitations of nation-states and international institutions to support meaningful change within the country. Yet, bearing witness and writing about the ongoing bloodshed within Iran – in tandem with organizing mass solidarity protests – is crucial both to document egregious human rights violations and to maintain pressure on the international community to further isolate the regime. International law and transnational solidarity alone are insufficient to prevent state violence against protesters. International pressure, however, remains a necessary first step toward holding the Iranian state accountable for its violations of the fundamental human rights of its citizens.

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