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Re-Assessing the Possibilities and Limits of Liberal Feminism and Women's Rights Activism in Iran

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Abstract

In this article, we reconsider the history and politics of Iranian feminism(s) in the light of the recent Woman Life Freedom uprising. We take this opportunity to reflect on the potentialities and weaknesses of decade-long engagements with feminism in Iran, highlighting a reluctance to commit to an intersectional analysis able to stream how economic and political hierarchies govern classed and racialised, not only gendered, bodies in different ways; and reflecting on movement-building strategies. To do so, the paper draws attention to two aspects of contemporary political work. First, we examine social media activism and its role in empowering or disempowering a politics of freedom. Second, we draw attention to dispersed forms of activism, based on affective connection between women and "everyday forms of resistance". While we believe that everyday resistance is meaningful, we also emphasise the dangers of becoming content with awareness advancements only, while lacking a strong movement-building strategy. In conclusion, we put Iranian feminism and its intellectual production in dialogue with broader internationalist struggles for liberation and freedom.

Keywords: Iran, Woman Life Freedom, Feminism, Intersectionality, Women's Rights Activism

Introduction

A striking legacy of Anna Vanzan's scholarship is her insistence to study Iran and Iranian women's activism in convergence with global politics. We write this essay in honour of her work, which we utilise to reflect on the Woman Life Freedom uprising

of 2022-3. Women and anti-patriarchal politics are central to this movement and we build on Vanzan's labour in bringing attention to a global Middle East where the Iranian women's role in pursuing freedom is celebrated. In particular, we reflect on what lessons are to be learnt by going back to history and studying critically the politics of women's rights in Iran in the light of the protests.

As we recognise the groundbreaking feminist political work that women have been manifesting in Iran since September 2022, we remain concerned with the ideological fluctuations of Iranian feminism(s), their organisational strategies and interventions in global debates and trends. In this essay, we move from our close observation of feminism in Iran and abroad in the past two decades. As scholars engaged in emancipatory politics, we both have approached Iranian women's struggle offering solidarity and, at the same time, interrogating its emancipatory potential for all Iranian people who embody differences and exist across geographical landscapes.

With a global view on the Middle East, we understand Iranian feminism to be a multi-layered ideology that at times transgresses the Islamic Republic's boundaries, but also shifts across geographical nation-state borders more broadly. It does so to meet the needs of Iranian women within the evolving politics of the Islamic Republic but also the international system. We celebrate the political disassociation from the state that Iranian women at times practice. Such an uncompromising and confrontational attitude demonstrates an unwillingness to reconcile with the state, which plays a major role in creating many of the social problems that are becoming increasingly unbearable for Iranian women and people in general. We equally recognise the need to, at other times, appeal to the state and work within the limits it sets for addressing concerns that pertain to gender and sexuality.

With a view to intersect material life conditions, embodied identities and the capacity to confront state violence, this article argues that a particular strand of feminism in Iran, liberal feminism, succeeded in becoming dominant and expanding middle-class participation while building a feminist vocabulary; and that it has however failed in implementing meaningful movement-building strategies as well as providing instruments to contrast state violence and mitigate the movement's vulnerabilities. We contend that liberal feminism has been hegemonic for a long time in Iran, although it may have been called otherwise considering that the adjective "liberal" makes feminism an even more controversial term in contemporary Iran. We argue that for two to three decades, the goals, priorities and discourse prevalent among feminist and women activists in Iran and abroad have been predominantly liberal. We aim to examine the legacy of this history for the current context, where feminist organising has become less structured as a movement, with online communities discussing gender and individualised protest activities taking foot, yet more diverse and radical than in the past, centring demands which have historically been marginalised by liberal feminists. In reference to the latest uprising in Iran, the renowned Iranian lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, while on a furlough

from prison, stated that hijab has historically not been a priority for women's rights activists in post-revolutionary Iran, but now it has become symbolic of young women's pursuit of bodily autonomy.[1] We argue that one of the reasons for this lack of attention to hijab has been the importance that the state has had for liberal feminist strategies in the past decades. Marginalising intersectionality and demands for bodily autonomy in favour of demands for legal changes has in fact enabled liberal feminist work under authoritarian rule. The voices of abolitionists and those who insisted upon women's full autonomy over their bodies were missing in liberal feminist movements and projects, because these have traditionally needed a degree of cooperation with the political class to push for legal reform, from family law to the personal status law, often their central demand.

In what follows, we first suggest a reading of the history of feminism in Iran since the early 1990s foregrounding class and the dynamics of political inclusion and exclusion that have characterised it. Then, we draw attention to activist strategies that have been pursued as a way to capture larger movement's configuration, both in the past and the present. We draw attention to two aspects of contemporary political work. First, we examine social media activism and its role in empowering or disempowering a politics of freedom. Activists and scholars have different takes on social media as an effective way to do political work, highlighting both the positive and negative sides of it. Some have argued that social media facilitate organising when the space for mobilisation is severely limited by state violence (Abbasgholizadeh 2014). Others are less enthusiastic and argue that a generational divide rests at the heart of feminist activism on social media which lacks the necessary collectivity for real-time policy changes in the Islamic Republic (Batmanghelichi 2021). We argue that social media reinforce individualism, even "celebrity activism" in some cases, all the while hampering the attempts at constructing political bonds that go beyond the online world and relatively loosely structured cycles of protests.

Second, we draw attention to dispersed forms of activism, based on affective connection between women and "everyday forms of resistance". We are sympathetic to these phenomena and celebrate the resistance of Iranian women along with other feminists. Even when episodic or individual, we believe that contention and resistance are indeed meaningful. However, we join others who have warned about the dangers of becoming content with consciousness and awareness advancements only, while lacking a strong movement-building strategy.

In conclusion, we put Iranian feminism and its intellectual production in dialogue with broader internationalist struggles for freedom, asking what can be learnt from a re-examination of it.

The Hegemony of Liberal Feminism

A Contested Label for a Consistent Political Agenda

We would like to reflect on what liberal feminism is and what it means in Iran because it does not necessarily follow what academic theorisations are adhered to by activists on the ground. In fact, not only feminism is a charged term in the Islamic Republic, which represses feminists as foreign-supported anti-revolutionary forces, but also "liberal" is a contested term which makes being a feminist even worse, if possible.

"Being liberal" has however gone through different phases of fortune and slander. As the Iranian state self-defines in opposition to liberalism, activists may define themselves as liberals as a strategy to take distance from the state and position themselves in opposition to it. Nayereh Tohidi (2016: 79), an Iranian-American academic and an important reference for feminist activists and intellectuals in Iran, argues that the "emphasis on legal reform [...] does not make Iranian feminist orientation limited to liberal feminism only. Although at this stage of economic and political development in Iran, liberalism can be very relevant, what may seem liberal in the Western democratic context can be perceived as quite radical in a repressive and retrogressive religious state". However, not all activists subscribe to this line of thought: some do not because of anti-liberal and leftist personal persuasions, while others do not because of the ambiguity and inaccuracy of the label "liberal" in the context of Iran.

Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, a well-known feminist and women's rights activist in Iran, leader of many campaigns among which the famous One Million Signature (OMS) campaign of the mid to late 2000s, reflects on the matter and argues that the label "liberal" does not make sense in Iran.[2] She writes that, although the fight to change legislation is considered as "liberal politics" in "classical analysis", this does not apply in Iran because no group can be defined as such, even when they adopt law reform as their mission. This is so for two reasons. First, legal reform is a goal of feminist movements of all kinds everywhere and it is not exclusive to liberal groups. Second, she cautions against the possibility that the criticism against a legal reform-focused approach might indicate the emulation of "some radical feminist groups in the West [who] have distanced themselves from liberal policies, such as the struggle to change anti-women laws". Groups in the West, she continues, are in a different situation because women there enjoy equal rights. This is a situation resulting from the fact that in the West, the middle class - which, according to Ahmadi-Khorasani, is the political actor pushing for liberal and democratic policies - has been empowered and enjoys a share of power. In the Middle East, instead, the middle class has expanded but could not participate politically and, therefore, it could not push for liberal policies and obtain stakes in power negotiations with the state - a reality which has incapacitated pro-women legislation.[3]

We agree that the focus on legal reform alone is not sufficient to make Iranian feminism

liberal. However, we argue that the pursuit of legal reform and the lack of an explicitly intersectional perspective, able to highlight and stream how economic and political hierarchies govern classed and racialised, not only gendered, bodies in different ways, have been the characteristics of dominant forms of feminism in Iran for decades. We understand liberal feminism as a state-centric ideology that relies on mentoring, advocacy, awareness raising, lobbying and affective solidarity to end discriminatory laws against women.

Feminism in Iran has had this form despite the reality that for non-elite women during everyday life in post-1979 Iran, one of the main goals of acts of citizenship has been the desire for freedom, not only for legal reform (Saeidi 2022). Historically, contingent longings for freedom have co-existed with rights demands and immediate pursuits of emancipation for women in post-revolutionary Iran. For example, during the 1980-8 period, leftist and Islamist women's desire to enter spaces and explore new experiences propelled them to challenge their families, classmates and colleagues, instead of making legal appeals to the state. For many working-class and non-elite women during the 1980-8 period, the state was just one centre of power, and they were more eager to address their needs through exchanges within society and social organisations.

Today, discussions about gender and neoliberalism, gender and race, and critiques of capitalism are taking foot in Iran, thanks to a bottom-up rehabilitation of the left and thanks to the exchange of ideas that take place on social media. Also, feminist groups have been establishing meaningful connections with informal trade unions and the struggles of workers. One example is the involvement of the feminist group Bidarzani with the teachers union's activism and protests, which have been numerous during the years, among others.[4] The networking activities carried out by feminists are neither recent nor new, however. In the pre-2009 era, the women's faction of the student organisation Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, led by the well-known activist Bahareh Hedayat, currently in prison,[5] played a crucial role in connecting students, feminists and workers' struggles, approaching the Bus Drivers' trade union which, during those years, was particularly active until it was crushed by state violence (Rivetti 2020a: 166).

In the past and until recently, to promote and achieve reforms, liberal feminists have often worked in tandem with Islamic feminists and state institutions, intertwining political discourses, pushing and negotiating boundaries. According to liberal feminists who were part of such efforts, there was no other option but to adapt, even when the price was ideological compromise. Marjan, a research participant of secular and liberal beliefs interviewed about her feminist activism in 2017,[6] recalls her experience in accessing the Presidential Office for Women's Affairs under the leadership of Shahla Habibi in the mid-1990s. Marjan recalls how during those years the government took the initiative to expand the space for women's participation, an opportunity which was seized by women active in social, cultural and political affairs.

However, she pointed out, not all women were welcome, and the government sponsored

Islamic-oriented pro-women's rights views and individuals only. The goal was to promote moderate women's rights-friendly legislation to increase women's participation in education, the public sphere and the job market, according to the government's post-war developmental agenda. Despite coming from a different political and ideological background, Marjan compromised and accessed the Office where she collaborated with Islamic feminists.[7]

As the space for pro-women's rights and feminist activism has historically been allowed but severely policed by state institutions, women of different ideological leanings have found a way to work together and "go beyond" political and ideological differences. This is what Ahmadi-Khorasani (2009: 36-7) theorises as the "fifth generation of feminists" in Iran: "its distinguishing characteristic is a non-ideological, issue-oriented approach. It focuses on the specific problem; it contextualises the problem; it invites every interested person from any walk of life and any political or ideological persuasion to participate; it leaves every participant room to devise his or her way of communicating with, mobilising, or recruiting others. In the process it not only gets ever closer to achieving its specific objective; it becomes a dynamic movement and an efficient social vehicle for creating awareness, promoting self-confidence, and laying the ground for communicative, horizontal, dialogical, and egalitarian leadership. It is not after cosmic change. It is non-violent and non-utopian. It has the advantage of the new communications technologies that provide an unprecedented opportunity for advocacy, movement building, and sharing of experiences. And, given the youthfulness of its membership, it is confident that it will prevail".

More recently, this goal-oriented, non-utopian and non-ideological attitude also motivated secular feminist lawyers to collaborate with Shahindokht Molaverdi, former Vice President during Rouhani's first mandate (2013-17) and President's Special Appointee for citizenship rights during the second one (2017-21), to the elaboration of a bill preventing and criminalising violence against women. The legislative proposal made it to the end of the law-making process in 2021 and it is interesting to consider that many among the lawyers who participated in the process come from an activist and secular background. Some of them had participated in the OMS campaign or, earlier, in other activist advocacy groups such as Meydoun-e Zanan and Rahi NGOs,[8] political experiences and groups which were regarded as too radical by the government in the early 2000s.

Cross-ideological campaigning also became a necessity for women's rights activists. Following the crackdown on NGOs during the reform Government of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), it became difficult for civil rights activists to remain consistently visible in the public space. Therefore, campaigns became a viable path for continuing women's rights struggles as they allowed cross-ideological alliance and cooperation while avoiding to single out individuals or specific groups as the responsible (Rivetti 2017). These campaigns include the OMS campaign (2006), Stop Stoning Forever Campaign

(2006), Mothers for Peace Campaign (2006), to name just a few. While these campaigns fell short of achieving their goal of placing an end to Iran's discriminatory laws, they did at times intervene to save women's lives[9] or stop the passing of discriminatory acts (Povey 2016). Campaigns also forged solidarity among Iranian women who participated in them[10] (Rivetti 2017) and encouraged women's sense of confidence to remain active in politics (Barlow and Nejati 2017; Rivetti 2020b).

While in the course of post-revolutionary history, the pro-women's rights activism of elite women has changed its organisational and networked forms, we emphasise the consistency of its agenda, in particular its focus on legal reform, and the importance given to awareness and advocacy. We believe that legal reform is relevant to all women in society. We also believe that the insistence on it, however, has had a number of consequences that, if undertheorised and overlooked, may have weakened the activists' capacity for intersectional analysis. Reflecting on the different approaches to activism among the feminist currents in Iran, Sara,[11] an activist with Bidarzani, argued that the preference for grassroots work versus research-based or lobbying activities is not a matter of personal inclination or political vision only. It is a class issue too, whereby middle-class women with professions such as academics, lawyers or journalists have resources and are able to access the political and intellectual class to lobby them, while working-class women do not have that option. Also, issues such as the privatisation of education and the rising housing prices may matter more than consciousness and awareness rising when it comes to the likelihood that poor families push girls to marry at a young age. While changing the law is important, Sara argued, working-class women know that researching legal changes and lobbying the political class is not enough. It follows that strategic concentration on advocacy work and the raising of social awareness is a viable feminist tactic for survival under the unpredictable context of authoritarian and misogynist rule. However, it may not necessarily meet the needs of marginalised and working-class women in real time.

Additionally, much of the work with poorer or disenfranchised women and girls is carried out by professionalised NGOs. As Fae Chubin (2020) argues, NGOs working in this field follow a liberal approach based on awareness raising, which often translates into a paternalistic approach to educating women about their rights and self-development, and on notions of emancipation, liberal agency, self-determination and economic autonomy. Not only Chubin found that these notions are questioned and criticised by the young women from the marginalised communities NGOs work with. But also, that they problematise the lack of focus and debate around issues of economic justice and larger structural oppression. The recent statement "The voice of Baluch women, Woman, Life, Freedom!" released in October 2022, echoes these considerations: "For years, sometimes passionate and openly and sometimes at home and in small groups, we, along with our sisters and brothers, have been sisterly resisting patriarchy, religious fundamentalism (Talibanism), ethnic and class discrimination, and the ruling Shiite

regressiveness. But we were under the impression that the guideline of the fight for a better life had already been written down for us in the form of democratisation, progress and development programmes, and that we needed to follow up our demands parallel to these programmes".[12]

Building on this analysis, we aim to discuss the legacy of Iranian liberal feminism today. Has liberal feminism succeeded in building a fierce legacy of feminist organising in Iran? How, and with what limits? What can feminists in Iran learn today from global theorisations about intersectionality, gender, feminism, reproductive work, and vice versa? These are the questions we aim to answer, in order to offer a contribution to reflections about socio-political change in Iran and beyond.

The Historical Background: The Survival of Informal Spaces for Feminist Activism in the Midst of Liberal Hegemony-Building

Since the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 and the Iranian Government's renewed activism in intergovernmental organizations, in which the government wanted a place to reclaim credibility, top-down efforts and bottom-up pressure teamed up to create spaces for pro-women's rights activism in the governance structure as well as in civil society. It is no coincidence that, in the 1990s and 2000s, not only developmental NGOs multiplied (whose mission also included the improvement of women's status, education and employment opportunities) but also, dedicated sections and committees were created within the President's Office and other institutions with the goal of drafting pro-women legislation.

As recalled by Mahboube Abbasgholizadeh, a long-time feminist activist, the government was very active in preparing for the 1995 UN Beijing World Women's Conference, calling on women from the political and intellectual class to participate in it by forming NGOs.[13] Abbasgholizadeh recalls that the magazine "Farzaneh" (whose director was then Massoumeh Ebtekar, who will become part of the President's Cabinet as Director of the Department of Environment in 1997, and Vice President between 2017 and 2021) was particularly active in promoting such a call, along with the soon-to-be Office of Women's Affairs, which received funding from the UN to encourage the establishment of NGOs and their participation in the World Women's Conference.

The importance of top-down pressure and intergovernmental organisations' role in strengthening women's voices within institutions is also recalled by Marjan. "As the Beijing conference on women approached", she recalled during an interview (cited in Rivetti 2020a: 105-6), "we became very busy. The Islamic Republic wanted to participate with NGOs [...] to show another face of Iran. [...] A lot of women were involved in the preparation for Beijing, but it was a governmental effort". A similar assessment is offered by Abbasgholizadeh. According to her, the government tried to appropriate the efforts of non-governmental activism.[14] Abbasgholizadeh, who was a member of the President's Office of Women's Affairs, decided to resign. Marjan (cited in Rivetti 2020a:

106) recalled an episode from the early 1990s that illustrates the "slipping in" of the notion of NGOs in the Iranian elite's agenda: "I remember Mr. Habibi (who was Vice President between 1989 and 2001) who came back from a UN meeting and said 'We need NGOs'".

While the role of top-down initiatives was important, it would be a mistake to overlook the role played by the pressure coming from the bottom. The regime in fact, in spite of the repression that followed the Revolution, never succeeded in eradicating feminist activism. Due to the state's legal inequalities and gender discrimination, informal feminist spaces for activism were forged and in the 1980s, women continued to meet and organise in informal circles (or *mahfel*). The influence of the rich and diverse feminist movement that participated in the revolution survived the war and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, paying a dear price in terms of repression. As observed by Ehsani (2017), the Iran-Iraq War was a period of regime consolidation and chaos at the same time, with opportunities for anti-regime activists and militants to undermine Khomeinist hegemony. While eventually such plans failed, feminist politics survived by inhabiting discrete informal spaces. These are the spaces that most non-elite women rely on for their everyday needs and survival. There, women's rights struggles are suppressed but feminist activism emerges, nevertheless.

For instance, leftist political prisoners during the 1980s refused to wear the chador while in prison. They succeeded in pushing back on the state's effort at controlling their bodies even from behind bars. In another illustration of informal spaces for feminist activism, Islamist women protested on warfronts when male soldiers tried to stop them from defending their homes in Southern Iran. Much like today, they were supported by men in their communities and even by some military elites (Saeidi 2022). As Catherine Sameh states (2019: 10), "women's equality has become a part of national discussion about what constitutes a just state and a good society." In line with this, Saeidi (2022) demonstrates that female supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini relied on the support of male relatives and local leaders during the revolution and war to forge their identities and gain access to warfronts. Saeidi (2022: 76) narrates the experience of Masoumeh Abad, whose brother shared with her Ali Shariati's book "Fatima is Fatima" when she was suspended from school during the Pahlavi monarchy for distributing leaflets on Islamic thought. Abad, who would later participate in the Iran-Iraq War and become a prisoner of war, remembers the way she felt the first time she read Shariati's book: "The words touched me in such a way that I did not notice the passage of time. As I read each page of the book, my temperature increased. Indeed, the book was setting fire to my soul. Each cell in my body was awakened, and this alertness was accompanied by pain, heat, and light".

Abad's feminine and sultry language describes a feminist bodily awakening. Shariati's work gave women from religious families the language to justify their desire to both participate in the revolution and war, but also remain pious Muslim women. Politically

active women during the 1979 Revolution were often seen to be impious due to the mixing of genders and late-night revolutionary activism. As such, the transition that Abad makes in the informal space of her home should not be underestimated. The connections between activism, identity and religion engendered her feminist sensibilities, and were made in the informal space of the home. Importantly, her brother served as a facilitator for Abad's transition from a young girl raised in a conservative household to a religious revolutionary. Ultimately, Abad supported the formation of an Islamic Republic in Iran by taking part in the war.

In another illustration, it was through the support of Shahid Mostafa Chamran, a revolutionary commander in Marivan, a city in the Iranian Kurdistan, and also a trained scientist who was later killed in the Iran-Iraq War, that the famous war journalist Maryam Kazemzadeh developed the confidence to report from Iran's Kurdistan. Kazemzadeh argues that it was over dinner with Chamran in Marivan that she came to see journalism as a career path (Saeidi 2022: 52): "Dr. Chamran asked about my love and interest for photography and journalism. Although the reason for our conversation was something else, we talked past our evening prayers and dinner. Dr. Chamran had a warm and calm voice. I listened to his words with my heart and soul. That night we talked about everything. He discussed the life and resistance of Dr. Ali Shariati, his death in London, and I was eagerly all ears. I had developed my religious, political and cultural awareness through the writing of Dr. Shariati, and I had a special interest in him".

It was dinner in a warfront with a military and political elite that reconnected Kazemzadeh with the writing of Shariati, which we can assume she read in her home during the period prior to or after the 1979 Revolution. Prior to meeting Chamran, she had even been interrogated by a military official who assumed she was part of the Kurdish opposition because he claimed that Muslim women were only seen in warfronts as fighters or spies. Journalism did not become a popular career path for women until the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and this makes Kazemzadeh a trailblazer for her role as a journalist in Kurdistan. While she was unwelcomed on the warfront, it was during an informal dinner with a military elite that she fine-tuned her feminist sensibilities and commitments.

In prisons, leftists relied on the politics of care to protect vulnerable women, such as new mothers, from the state's gendered citizenship violence. Saeidi (2022) recounts that one of her interviewees, Maryam Nouri, gave birth while in prison. During the interview, Maryam recalled how people scolded the revolutionary guard who had accompanied her to the hospital for her labour and delivery. As they left the hospital together, she was forced to carry her bags and newborn with no help. She cherished the public response to the guard in that moment, and used it to console herself during difficult days in prison for it symbolised the solidarity that the nation had with her resistance. Sometime after giving birth, Nouri realised that prison officials refused extra food for the children of other female prisoners. She refused the extra meal given to her

son, stating that either all of the children receive sufficient meals, or her son would not accept the offer either. The care that Iranians provided one another in informal spaces for politics, such as the hallways of the hospital, created room for feminist activism in other informal spaces as well.

The consolidation of liberal and Islamic feminism in the 1990s and 2000s also built on the legacy of the informal activism discussed above, although it took a different, more institution-focused, trajectory. Providing opportunities for women to set up organisations, making space for feminist magazines by increasing the number of licensed publications (Ghoreishi 2021), and expanding the activities and the size of the Presidential Office of Women's Affairs were some of the strategies adopted by the government to revive the enthusiasm of feminists and young women since the mid-1990s.[15] Jaleh, a long-time feminist activist who served a number of prison sentences since 2007,[16] for example, recalls how she became an activist during her first year at university. "I became an activist in 1997, in Khatami's *setad-e entekhabat* (Electoral Committee); it was political activism, [and] after that I moved to social activism. In 2002, I became a social activist with the Kanun-e Hastia Andish NGO, an NGO that worked for women [...], we had a website, we gave classes in IT, English to women. However, it was more about our own empowerment, [the work in the NGO] was very important to us NGO workers and volunteers because we had the opportunity to experience what empowerment is. The NGO was closed before 2005 because of legal problems. Meanwhile, in 2003, Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Prize, and she received it without wearing the hijab in Norway. Then, I was part of a women's forum (*hamandishe-ye zanan*) to support her [...]. The forum remained active for some years [...] it was from that forum that the OMS campaign took shape [...]. The forum was not an NGO or an association. The members were active in other groups, but we knew each other and kept in touch. The forum was [also] involved in two big protests, one in front of the university, in 2005 just before Ahmadinejad was elected, and the second was in Haft-e Tir [a square in central Tehran] the year after".[17]

Jaleh's biographical trajectory is not unique. A number of activists, in fact, started their political work during those years, as Khatami's reformist Government was trying to enlarge and consolidate support from the intellectual and political class in order to push for reforms, including legislation to increase the freedom of the press and associations.

It is important however to emphasise that the reformist government was strictly policing inclusion. Between 1997 and 2005 in fact, many NGOs and organisations working for women's empowerment were established but, at the same time, many of them were shut down. The difficulties NGOs were experiencing, coupled with the governmental efforts to govern the process of inclusion, resulted in the promotion of a specific type of permissible activism - often characterised by a professionalised approach to advocacy, legal reform and women's emancipation through education and access to the job market.

Therefore, the government trained professionals in the sector and helped establish a number of "resource centres" for NGOs. Jamileh, a former journalist member of the OMS campaign and involved in the NGO sector since the late 1990s, recalls that in 2004 the Minister of Interior selected a group of women (including herself) to participate in a training session in Germany. There, not only they received information about international conventions on women's rights, but also training on public speaking and appropriate behaviour and clothing at formal dinners.[18]

This selective inclusion resulted in a division in the feminist field, whereby more "respectable" feminist individuals and groups (with more social capital and willing to interact with the state at a time when the political class was keen on co-opting and working with feminists) were separated from groups whose ideology, strategies or identity (working-class and radical feminists, for instance, which ended up being marginalised by more desirable feminists whose main goal was legal and cultural reform) were seen as politically too risky and less relevant altogether.

During the years, this exclusionary politics, which we understand as a form of state violence perpetrated on both those who were included and excluded, has played an important role in consolidating feminist strategies focused on legal reform and the work of lawyers and other professionals from the NGO sector, journalism and academia. The NGO sector has survived multiple waves of repression, which have discouraged a radical approach and have awarded those organisations complying with an increasingly controlling legislation (Akbarzadeh, Barlow and Nasirpour 2021). Because more radical and intersectional approaches were structurally discouraged, legal reform has remained central to the political agenda of feminists and women's NGOs.

Limits and Potentiality of Contemporary Feminist and Women's Organising

A crucial legacy of this kind of liberal, legal reform-centred, and NGO-ised activism is a reluctance to confront state violence, in spite of its pervasiveness. Historically, this reluctance has stemmed out of the persuasion that, by cooperating with state institutions, legal reform and progressive change were possible. We do not condemn this political vision, as we understand that it only made sense in its own historical and political context. Rather, we consider the implications that shying away from an intersectional analysis of state violence has had.

Joy James argues that the refusal or inability to address how one can confront state violence hampers efforts to change oppressive structures.[19] This is especially the case when the state has made it clear it will not allow activists to "pass through" (that is, unpack and deconstruct state violence with the goal of dismantling it) by challenging its sovereignty. We fear that by ignoring the relevance of thought on how activists are to confront state violence, activists can be co-opted by the state or eliminated through a variety of means, including premature death. In fact, the under-theorisation of state violence and of other ways to relate to the state than demands for reform, has

left social movements with little means to respond to state brutality other than direct action which, in the context of a closed political scene where only liberal activism has been (relatively) tolerated like in Iran, has not been strategically and tactically elaborated upon. This has reduced the ability of feminist political groups to engage in movement-building strategies, facilitating the move of organised collective activism online and the emergence of individualised forms of activism after state repression hit. Therefore, the widespread use of social media for political organising is linked to the state overpowering of social movements. Online activism has been a viable alternative for feminist exchange and education in times of intense repression. Many websites and social media accounts have emerged as the state suppressed organised women's rights activism offline. For instance, the website Feminist School (Madreseh-ye Feministi, an important point of reference for feminists in Iran) became the "intellectual wing" of the women's movement in 2008 as the OMS campaign increasingly became the target of security forces in Iran (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2022). Today, social media accounts such as Harass Watch have replaced campaigns that, years ago, were offline and carried out in the public space through art-ivism.

While offering a shelter, we argue that online activism further weakens the process of knowledge transfer between generations of activists, which has been historically incapacitated by state violence through incarceration, arrests and forced exile. In online activism, instrumental changes of positions, for example, are made possible by disappearing media content and by the overproduction of content, which make it difficult to strategise because the real target or goal of political action may constantly shift. The intense affective vibrations of social media content create an environment where the positionality of activists can be impossible to historicise for the purpose of strategising. It follows that movements, and the feminist movement in particular because of its level of securitisation, may struggle more to delineate their profile, missions and strategy unless face-to-face and offline activism make a return in an organised manner.

When conducted online, knowledge transmission and movement-building may make movements vulnerable to the infiltration of state-sponsored agents undercover. During conversations with contacts in Iran, both authors have repeatedly been reminded that popular social media accounts in Persian are not only bought but at times even created by the Islamic Republic. Social media connections may be forged through accounts managed by authentic, even notable, persons. For social media activists at large, the discursive and material distance of the virtual world makes it challenging to identify intangible hooks, such as retweets, likes, and mentions, as an act of infiltration. Furthermore, the competition over being a celebrity activist, and the role of state funds in activating this process in some cases, means that social media has become a place for resistance at the price of organised activism on the streets.

The "activist as witness" and the individualisation of episodes of contention are two

other outcomes of a lack of critical thought regarding how activists should collectively encounter state violence and cope with the impossibility of reform. For instance, internationally acclaimed human rights activist, Narges Mohammadi, chronicles the experiences of female political prisoners with solitary confinement as a particularly cruel state tactic for a complete "remaking" of the character and beliefs of dissidents and others. While Mohammadi herself has experienced solitary confinement and many years of prison, she rarely discusses her own suffering and focuses mostly on that which others have endured. The globally renowned human rights attorney, Nasrin Sotoudeh, also relies on giving witness to the experiences of non-elite Iranian women.

Online activism, the act of witnessing violence and unstructured politics based on ordinary life are important in creating political imagination, but we are aware that they might not morph easily into action or analysis which question the state as the space for political actionability. For instance, we are aware that by engaging in acts such as wearing more colourful scarves, walking their dogs in the street, dancing and singing, or holding hands with partners during walks in the park, Iranian women are defining their own preferences without high-risk confrontation with the state (Bayat 2013; Afary 2022). While we do not dismiss the significance of a diverse approach to social movements, we wonder if these acts have been given an exaggerated level of influence over progressive transformation in Iran.

As Saeidi (2022) argues, disorganised movements need not necessarily have progressive outcomes. Indeed, the logic of avoiding leadership and giving young people space to experiment with new ways of being is also a tactic used by the Islamic Republic in its encouragement of Hizbollah cultural activism. Saeidi (2022) shows that the activism that most Hizbollahi women do from home or in other informal spaces, results in unpredictable outcomes that include neoliberal feminist politics that centre around purely self-interested decision-making patterns.

Additionally, an overcommitment to the possibilities for progressive transformation as led by ordinary acts has resulted in a lack of reflection on state violence. The diverse approaches used in liberal feminism in Iran have reaped little engagement with intersectionality as a lens to visualise or explore women's diverse interests and concerns. For instance, veteran women's rights activist, Mansoureh Shojaee, has explicitly stated that while intersectionality is the most progressive theory to emerge in recent years in the field of gender studies, it is not applicable locally to Iran.[20] She argues that this is because the women working with intersectionality as a theory have never been forced to wear the hijab. However, intersectionality could offer a guide for understanding the problems and issues non-elite and working-class women are dealing with as the country's authoritarian rule and cultural norms evolve.

Ultimately, with its refusal to integrate non-elite women more aggressively in its objectives and approaches for "passing through the state" as Joy James states, Iran's feminist movement has been able to serve this population only partially. In the process,

it also has failed to offer a platform for the increasingly radical voice that Iran's non-elite female population came to embody. Moreover, traditionally, the transition from authoritarianism to democracy has rested on a carefully calculated movement by the opposition that does not overlook the interests of those who wield coercive power (Etzioni-Halevy 1997). If this kind of incremental action is deemed as ineffective, and we can certainly see why this would be the case, feminists and others must grapple with how one passes through the state and all of its violence when it has vowed to prevent such transgression.[21]

There is significant and powerful emotional work embedded in all the forms of activism discussed in this section. Yet it remains unclear what freedom means to activists and organised movements. From online activism, to witnessing the pain of the nation, and individualised contention, Iranians are pushing back on the post-1979 state's interference into their lives by reconnecting to their embodied desires for freedom. The current slogans for freedom expressed by young and older Iranians suggest that the Iranian people are at a pivotal point, and also illustrate our observation that emotions, embodied experience and freedom are entangled for Iranians in the post-1979 era. However, the pursuit of freedom is hardly an uncomplicated one. As Neferti Tadiar (2022: 12) argues, the contemporary world begs further consideration of how liberation from the state's hold on sovereignty can exist simultaneously with avoidance of violence against humans in the "realm of everyday material social life." What freedom means to Iranians needs to be further explored in order to move beyond the binary frameworks that see "revolution" or "reform" as the only options for achieving freedom.

Concluding Remarks in a Time of Upheaval

We believe that the Woman Life Freedom uprising marks a point of no return for Iranian society as well as for scholars of Iran. We see this movement as a movement of "its own time" born out of an increasingly authoritarian world, yet one that offers never-ending access to radical thought. Much like Black Lives Matter in the United States and the Ni Una Menos movement in Latin America and Southern Europe, the Iranian protest movement is intersectional, feminist and anti-racist. It has taken shape through the protestors' transnational connections and conversations with multiple and diverse global constituencies. In a way, this protest movement results from the political imagination of a generation that acts upon globalisation and defines it, rather than being defined by it and by hostile and oppressive international politics. However, we are aware that there are multiple ideologies competing for defining the more or less progressive trajectory of the movement and its legacy (Rivetti and Saeidi 2023).

In our article, we point out that there is a significant distance between what liberal, reform-focused feminism identified as its priorities, and the priorities that, we understand, the protestors have expressed in 2022-3. We believe that examining this distance is an important endeavour academics should engage in, and that it is part

of our work as intellectuals. We do not mean to condemn Iranian Islamic and liberal feminism and their representatives. With all of the limitations that we examined, we believe that liberal and Islamic feminism have tremendously contributed to the formation of the anti-patriarchal sentiments that we see in Iran today. Equally, we believe that such sentiments are the results of other, more radical and less institution-focused, influences that young Iranians have been exposed to through social media and transnational cultural products.

We would like to conclude with a note about the importance of defending academic freedom. We are living through incredibly hopeful and hopeless times. As we painfully observe Iranians (academics and non-academics) living in the diaspora accuse each other of being pro-regime or American agents with the goal of co-opting the protests and imposing silence on their "opponents," we strongly call for a self-reflexive analysis which can advance our understanding of the Iranian society. Being able to have difficult and nuanced conversations without fear of becoming a victim of a character-killing campaign is a question of academic freedom. This article about the political limitations and potentialities of Iranian feminism goes in this direction.

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