

FROM REVOLUTION TO REPRESSIONS: WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND STATE POWER IN IRAN FROM 1979 TO TODAY

Abstract

Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic placed gender policy at the very core of its authoritarian governance. The transformation of women's rights in Iran can be traced through four distinct historical phases: from revolutionary mobilization to early regression (1979–1983), from theocratic consolidation to reformist feminism (1980–2005), the rise of digital activism (2010–2020), and finally the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement of 2022–2023. Each shift in the status of women—whether regressive or resistant—illuminates the intricate relationship between state ideology and personal freedom. Women were not only active participants in the revolution, but also among its first victims. Their legal, social, and political status became the principal arena for the ideological consolidation of the Islamic Republic. The transformation of women's rights in Iran since the late 20th century not only reflects changes in policy but also reveals how religion, nationalism, and authoritarianism converge in shaping the boundaries of citizenship and state power.

Key words: Iran, women's rights, authoritarianism, Islamic Republic, gender politics, revolution, hijab, feminism.

Introduction

Gender politics is not a peripheral element of the Islamic Republic's authoritarian architecture, it is central. The regime legitimizes itself by suppressing public dissent and positioning its identity between the sacred and the national. In each of the phases mentioned above, gender serves not merely as a social category, but as a political instrument. For instance, mandatory hijab is not solely about Islamic modesty, but about regulating public space, signaling loyalty, and disciplining dissent. Similarly, nationalist tropes about family, morality, and sacrifice turn women's bodies and labor into tools of state control (Al-Sayyad, Al-Blawi, 2020).

Revolutionary Mobilization and Early Regression (1979-1983)

Under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), especially during Mohammad Reza Shah's White Revolution, Iranian women achieved significant legal and social advances. The Family Protection Laws raised the minimum marriage age to 18, granted women divorce and custody rights, limited polygamy, and reformed abortion policy - an era considered among the most progressive in Muslim-majority contexts (Kaufman, 2023). However, these

reforms largely benefited urban middle-class women and were implemented in a top-down manner through bureaucratic structures such as the Women's Organization of Iran. By the late 1970s, women had the right to vote in local and national elections, were engaged in higher education, and began entering professional and civic roles. Despite these achievements, the Pahlavi modernization agenda drew criticism from both religious conservatives and secular leftists. Religious ulema viewed it as capitulation to Western influence, while leftist groups highlighted underlying class inequalities. Interestingly, this shared dissatisfaction enabled the temporary formation of a broad, ideologically diverse coalition of secularists, religious activists, and feminists who participated in the 1978–79 revolution that overthrew the Shah (Boroujerdi, Sadeghi, 2023).

The April 1979 referendum confirmed the establishment of the Islamic Republic (with 98% voting "yes"). Following the solidification of the constitutional framework, the state quickly began purging feminists, leftists, and moderates. By July 1980, unveiled women were banned from public service; by July 1981, hijab had become legally mandatory in public, gradually enforced until 1983, when physical punishment (up to 74 lashes) was introduced for noncompliance (IHRDC 2011). This sequence of events reflects the regime's interpretive synthesis: religion as state ideology, nationalism linked to Islamic identity, and authoritarianism enforced through legal sanctions (Al-Sayyad, Al-Blawi, 2020).

Theocratic Consolidation and Feminist Awakening

Following the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Islamic Republic accelerated the consolidation of power socially, politically, and legally. Women's roles were reframed around motherhood, the family, and population growth, while religion, nationalism, and authoritarianism were solidified within a rigid gender contract. Laws changed dramatically: the minimum marriage age for girls was reduced from 18 to the age of puberty (as young as nine), polygamy was reinstated, and unilateral divorce rights for men were restored - all under the banner of Islamic jurisprudence (Shariah). Women's roles in employment and public life diminished: female labor force participation dropped from 11.1% to 6.8% during the war, and women were gradually excluded from judicial and senior governmental positions (Kaufman, 2023). Concurrently, clerical discourse recast women as symbols of national strength, transitioning from martyrdom to moral guardianship. While enrollment in primary and secondary education for girls increased, access to university was heavily restricted to "appropriate" fields, excluding technical disciplines and enforcing gender segregation on campuses (IHRDC 2011).

Mohammad Khatami's unexpected 1997 election ushered in what became known as the "Tehran Spring." His platform was centered on civil society renewal, cultural openness, and political liberalization which resonated strongly with women, youth, and intellectuals. Women's publications proliferated, often advocating for legal reform, expanded rights, and reinterpretation of Sharia (Noori, Mosayebnia, 2024). During this period, two major feminist campaigns emerged within an Islamic framework, reflecting a broader trend: Islamic feminism. This strategy advocated for women's rights within Islamic jurisprudence. Scholars such as Nayereh Tohidi, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini led this intellectual shift, merging human rights discourse with Islamic ethics and arguing that core Islamic teachings could support justice and equality (Monshipouri, 2004).

Revolutionary Feminism and State Pushback

The advent of social media fundamentally altered the frameworks of Iranian feminist protest. One of the early online campaigns, "White Wednesdays," emerged in 2014, encouraging women to publicly remove their

hijabs on Wednesdays and share photos as a call for choice. Though smaller in scale than earlier protests, this digital activism demonstrated how religion, nationalism, and authoritarianism manifest in everyday life and how women used technology to challenge them. Women engaged in clerical discourse through blogs, podcasts, and publications, reinterpreting fatwas, Sharia, and national ideals to assert that personal freedom is not anti-Islamic. Nevertheless, the state's authoritarian logic intensified: arrests, surveillance, and judicial harassment against activists like Masih Alinejad and Narges Mohammadi became routine, underscoring that women's bodies and choices remained central to state control (Boroujerdi, Sadeghi, 2023).

On 16 September 2022, 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa (Jina) Amini died after being detained in Tehran by the morality police for allegedly violating hijab regulations. Her death triggered the "Women, Life, Freedom" (WLF) protests, which rapidly spread to over 80 cities, combining demands for women's liberty with broader calls for democracy and secular governance (Boroujerdi, Sadeghi, 2023). The WLF movement is widely recognized as the most inclusive, decentralized, and intergenerational uprising in Iran's history. Participants ranged from urban youth to ethnic minorities, laborers, and religious Iranians, united by feminist demands and broader socio-economic grievances. Their acts of defiance - burning hijabs, cutting hair, chanting slogans like "Do not be afraid, we are all together" - represented civil disobedience aimed at dismantling gendered authoritarianism buttressed by religious-nationalist ideology (IHRDC 2011).

The regime responded with brutal repression: reports from the UN and Amnesty International documented the killing of at least 500 individuals, tens of thousands of arrests, widespread torture, sexual violence, and numerous show trials and executions—including of politically accused women such as Sharifeh Mohammad and Pakhshan Aziz. Nevertheless, the government retreated on the proposed "Chastity and Hijab" law, demonstrating how feminist resistance forced the regime into concessions (Al-Sayyad, Al-Blawi, 2020).

Conclusion

For over four decades, gender policy in Iran has served as both a reflection and an instrument of state power, revealing how religion, nationalism, and authoritarianism intersect in shaping governance. Each phase of women's rights from Pahlavi-era reforms, post-revolutionary regression, reformist activism, to today's revolutionary uprising shows that female autonomy remains central to regime legitimacy. Mandatory hijab, family law, and access to public space all delineate ideological boundaries. Religion provides doctrinal justification, nationalism supplies symbolic weight, and authoritarianism ensures obedience. Together, they forge a "gender contract" between individual and state. Authoritarian regimes grounded in religious-nationalist ideology rely heavily on the control of women, but this dependence also reveals their vulnerability. When women rebel, they challenge not only personal oppression but the core of ideological authoritarianism. Their ongoing struggle suggests that any future social contract in Iran must treat gender justice not as a peripheral concern, but as a foundational principle.

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