Believing Bodies: Gender, Islam, Violence and Transformation in Contemporary Iran

Sara Hejazi*

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Abstract: This article examines the role of religion in shaping conflict and peace in contemporary Iran through the lens of gender and Islamic feminist activism. Drawing on a historical genealogy from the Qajar era to the Islamic Republic and to present times, it shows how women's bodies and legal status have been central to the biopolitical construction of the modern nation and to the contested terrain where emergent gender identities and state violence have intersected. At the same time, the article highlights how Iranian Muslim feminists—scholars, activists, and ordinary women—have articulated internal critiques of patriarchal jurisprudence through renewed interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic law. These reinterpretations challenged structural violence, promoted legal reform, and generated educational spaces that cultivate critical reasoning and ethical agency grounded in Islamic tradition. Nowadays, rather than offering definitive solutions, Islamic feminism provides culturally situated tools for rethinking conflict, expanding interpretive authority, and fostering everyday practices of nonviolent transformation within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

Keywords: Gender, Islam, Violence, Biopolitics

1. Ten, One Hundred, One Thousand Lolitas in Teheran

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) has long symbolized the tension between female subjectivity and regimes of ideological control in post-revolutionary Iran. Yet, beyond the Western fascination often attached to her memoir, the dynamics Nafisi evokes—women negotiating desire, authority, and autonomy under the gaze of state power—have far deeper historical roots. Since the Nineteenth century, gendered religious discourses and practices have constituted the central political arena in which Iranian society has defined itself, struggled with

* **Sara Hejazi**, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Italy, E-mail: hejazi@fbk.eu

modernity, distanced from Western domination and confronted violence in its symbolic and institutional forms. Throughout these decades, Iranian rulers and intellectuals—traditional, reformist, revolutionary or *gharbzadeh (westernised)*—have repeatedly turned to women's bodies, sexuality, and visibility as the terrain on which national authenticity and moral order were to be secured, contested or triggered in their transformative force. As shown in some of my previous work (Hejazi 2018; 2023), between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, gender functioned as a primary marker through which the state shaped citizens, disciplined behaviour, and crafted the boundaries of the "modern" nation. The politicization of the female body—its veiling, unveiling and re-veiling, its presence or absence from public space—became a condensed signifier of Iran's civilizational aspirations and anxieties. After the 1979 Revolution, this symbolic regime intensified. Shi'a Islam was mobilized both as an instrument of political authority and as a moral vocabulary through which dissent could be articulated (Moghissi, 1994) Women quickly emerged as central figures in this dual process. While the state used patriarchal jurisprudence and ritualized modesty to legitimize control, women activists, scholars, and ordinary citizens turned to the same religious tradition to craft forms of internal critique. Their renewed engagement with the Qur'an, *fiqh*, and the distinction between religion and religious knowledge produced interpretive openings that destabilized the gendered foundations of state violence. This is the paradox at the heart of contemporary Iran and its feminist activism: the same symbolic structures that justify exclusion or coercion has also served as resources for resistance. Islamic feminism—emerging in the late 1980s and 1990s—did not arise in opposition to Islam but from within the discursive space created by political Islam itself- on the one side- and by the specific historical process through which Iran became a Nation and a Modern state- on the other side. Women who had once embraced revolutionary ideals, in the aftermath of the revolution, confronted legal inequalities, restrictive interpretations of the Shar'ia, and gender segregation deemed "authentically Islamic." However, through *ijtihād* (Ebadi, 2006) and new hermeneutical approaches, through taking over public spaces and discourse, they reclaimed Islam's ethical core from its patriarchal codification. If Nafisi's Tehran reading group imagined literature as a space of emancipation, millions of Iranian women, during two centuries, engaged in a quieter but no less radical act: reading and re-reading Islam, tradition, and modern female models. Ten, one hundred, one thousand Lolitas—not as objects of voyeuristic curiosity, but as interpreters, critics, and authors of their own religious and political worlds- are the main carachters of the unfolding of the recent history of Iran, its peculiarities and its future paths.

1.1 How to Become "Modern," or at Least Look Like It: Sexuality and Gender Roles in Modern Iran

As Michel Foucault argued in *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. I, 1984), the Nineteenth Century marked the rise of modern bio-power, a regime in which political authority sought to govern populations through the classification of bodies, the medicalization of sexuality, the delineation of "normal" and "deviant" behaviours (Arnaud, 2015), and the assignment of fixed gender roles in the public sphere (Felski, 1995). Although these processes developed primarily in Europe, they travelled transnationally and reshaped how non-Western societies—including

Iran—began to understand gender, sexuality, and the prerequisites of modern nation-building. Under Qajar rule (1789–1925), Iran was economically weak, politically fragmented, and profoundly shaped by Shi'a clerical authority. Cultural influence came predominantly from French and Russian countries. Yet it was the increasing presence of European imperial powers that catalyzed a complex process of cultural mimesis (Girard, 2008). The Qajar elite, confronted with Western military and technological superiority, experienced a deepening sense of economic and cultural vulnerability. The pursuit of "becoming modern" emerged not merely as admiration for Europe but as an urgent strategy for survival—an attempt to forestall political domination by adopting the external signs of civilization that Europe appeared to demand. Modernity was thus imagined as a defensive shield: *to modernize was to avoid disappearance*. It basically meant to adopt some of the core features-be they technological or mental, material and immaterial-of european modernity. In the first place, gender relations and roles. Seeking recognition in European eyes, Iranian intellectuals and statesmen began to adopt Western cultural markers, questioning veiling practices, segregation of sexes and even mores and customs of the household. As Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued (2005), Nineteenth-century Iran underwent a dramatic reconfiguration of its sexual imaginary due to contact with European and longing for Modernity: homoerotic traditions long embedded in Persian poetry, prose, and visual culture were increasingly suppressed as Iranian thinkers internalized European discourses that cast such practices as evidence of Oriental backwardness (Najmabadi, 2003; Tavakoli-Targhi, 1993). The confrontation with European gender norms—heteronormativity, companionate marriage, the unveiled public woman—generated a powerful cultural dissonance. If modernity required heterosexuality, then practices and symbols perceived as obstructing heterosocial interaction became obstacles to national progress. Reformers such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani argued that veiling encouraged male homoerotic desire by limiting men's visual and social access to women (Najmabadi, Ibid, p. 149). The veil thus ceased to be a purely religious, traditional or moral marker: it became a political problem, a sign of civilizational inferiority, a barrier preventing Iran from entering the community of "modern nations." By the late Nineteenth century, Iranians had become acutely aware of an external "gaze" judging their gender norms—one that was not merely foreign but authoritative, tied to the asymmetrical power of European states. This gaze suggested that only by adopting Western gender practices—heterosociality, unveiling, nuclear family structures—could Iran claim modern status. Gender therefore became a symbolic terrain of national anxiety, shaped by the fear of cultural erasure, the pressure of Western domination, and the desire to assert a viable modern identity. As the Constitutional Revolution unfolded (1906–1911), these tensions crystallized into a new political vocabulary (Afary, 1996). The emergence of *masaleh-ye zan*—the "women's question"—signaled that gender had become a publicly contested site of national reform. Women's organizing, petitions to the Majles, and the formation of secret societies such as *Anjoman-e Azadi-ye Zanan* and *Anjoman-e Zanan-e Neqabpush* (Mohammadi, 2007) marked the rise of a distinct political consciousness. Although these movements were largely elite-driven, women were no longer merely symbolic figures in male-led nationalist discourse; they became political actors imagining alternative collective futures. Yet religion—especially Shi'a clerical authority—acted as both constraint and catalyst. While some *Ulama* denounced women's associations as un-Islamic innovations, others defended them by invoking precedents of women's participation in Islamic history. This tension foreshadowed a defining feature of

Iranian gender politics for the next century: religion could be mobilized to suppress change but also to legitimize new imaginaries. The seeds of Islamic feminism—though not yet named as such—were already present in these debates. By the end of the Qajar era[1], gender had become a metonym for national transformation. The shift from ambiguous sexual traditions to heteronormative ideals, from female seclusion to guarded public participation, and from informal women's influence to explicit political demands, produced the conceptual matrix from which later gender models—both Pahlavi and Islamic—would emerge (Katouzian, 2006). Most importantly, it was in this period that Iranian society internalized modernity not as a neutral ideal but as a *necessity for national survival*, shaping gender reform into an existential response to the pressures of empire and the fear of cultural marginalization.

2. Soldiers of Purity: Ideal Women for Modern Utopias

The Pahlavi dynasty intensified and institutionalized the link between gender and nation-building. Reza Shah's reforms—especially the 1936 unveiling decree—sought to modernize Iran not only through economic and infrastructural change but by reshaping cultural life at its foundations. The state intervened directly in women's sartorial choices, public visibility, and access to education, marking a decisive moment in the use of gender as a political instrument. Whereas Qajar-era modernization had remained largely symbolic and restricted to elite circles, Pahlavi reforms penetrated everyday life: the whole country was connected through railroad; schools were secularized and desegregated; women were hired as teachers, and family law was revised. Yet this transformation was profoundly top-down. Although the state celebrated unveiling as a sign of emancipation and progress, many women experienced it as coercive and humiliating. The rise of *Kanun-e Banovan*, a female association composed mainly of elite women loyal to the monarchy, revealed the regime's intent to displace grassroots women's activism with a controlled, ideologically aligned form of "state feminism." As Hamideh Sedghi notes (2007), the Shah's gender policies were inseparable from the struggle to curb clerical power. Unveiling and new employment opportunities for women served not only as tools of modernization but also as deliberate mechanisms to weaken the clergy's cultural influence. Gender thus became a contested battleground on which the monarchy and religious authorities vied for moral legitimacy and social authority. Forced secularization, in turn, pushed portions of society toward a renewed attachment to religious identity—a dynamic that would later nourish revolutionary ideology (Corbin, 1971). By the 1960s and 1970s, this polarization intensified amid rapid socio-economic change. Urbanization and industrial development expanded women's participation in the workforce, yet political repression, economic inequality, and widespread disillusionment deepened. For many Iranians, modernization was experienced less as empowerment than as alienation, surveillance, and moral dislocation. In this environment, Shi'a Islam—particularly as reinterpreted by the philosopher Ali Shariati—offered a framework capable of integrating cultural authenticity with political resistance and social justice. Shariati, educated at the Parisian Sorbonne, reconstructed the figure of Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter, as an emblem of revolutionary purity and critical consciousness (Shariati, 1971). Instead of portraying her as a passive spiritual figure, he presented her as a

[1] First 2 decades of the XXth Century

model of intellectual agency, moral courage, and political engagement—modern yet authentic, spiritual yet revolutionary. Her purity was no longer tied primarily to modesty or seclusion but to moral clarity, critical judgment, and willingness to sacrifice for justice. This reinterpretation contributed to the emergence of the "Islamic woman," a militant and desexualized figure whose piety legitimized political struggle. During the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Iran–Iraq war, this model crystallized: the veiled woman became a symbol of national endurance, a guardian of *vatan (*homeland), and the embodiment of revolutionary virtue (Adelkhah, 1991; Arjomand, 1988). The black chador simultaneously concealed sexuality and signalled ideological commitment, functioning as a uniform of moral warfare and a public marker of loyalty. From an analytical perspective, this revolutionary gender model did not simply empower women; it instrumentalized them. Their symbolic value was mobilized for political ends, even as legal inequalities deepened. Many secular women were marginalized, dismissed from their professions, or confined to new gendered spaces, as Shirin Ebadi recounts (2006). The Islamic Republic constructed its identity around women's visibility as compliant revolutionary subjects—mothers of martyrs, teachers of Islamic morality, guardians of the family. The revolutionary ideal woman was therefore a paradox: hyper visible in propaganda and political discourse, yet restricted in rights and agency. Her sacralised role upheld a political theology that legitimized gender segregation, compulsory veiling, and legal asymmetry. Yet this very visibility and centrality—in both symbolic and political registers—would later generate the conditions for an internal critique of the Islamic Republic's gender order.

3. From State Ideology to Internal critique: The Emergence of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism in Iran did not emerge in opposition to Islam but through a reappropriation of its epistemic foundations. Its genealogy is inseparable from the Revolution, the Iran–Iraq war, and the profound socio-economic transformations unfolding from the 1980s onward. While the early years of the Islamic Republic were marked by legal retrenchment—revived patriarchal family laws, compulsory veiling, gender segregation, and sharp restrictions on women's public roles—social realities were shifting in ways that increasingly contradicted ideological rigidity. The war mobilized women into sectors such as health, education, and public administration; literacy rates rose sharply; urbanization accelerated (Kano, 1996); and, despite legal constraints, women progressively occupied public spaces and pursued higher education in unprecedented numbers. By the late 1980s, two developments began to undermine the intellectual foundations of the state's gender regime. First, demographic strain led the government to reverse its position on family planning and promote contraception, implicitly acknowledging the changing social position of women. Second, a new generation of religious intellectuals—most prominently Abdolkarim Soroush(1996)—articulated a distinction between immutable revelation and historically contingent human interpretation (Kandyoti, 1991). If *ijtihād* (interpretation) was subject to temporal and social conditions, then the patriarchal rulings embedded in the *fiqh* cannot claim eternal or divine authority (Abu-Lughod, 1998). Soroush's assertion that believers "are immersed in an ocean of interpretations" opened a conceptual space in which the religio-legal foundations of gender inequality could be critically

reassessed. Ziba Mir-Hoseini (2011) has described Islamic feminism as the "unwanted child" of political Islam: the Islamic Republic's insistence on codifying classical juristic rulings ultimately exposed their historical nature and rendered them open to contestation. Women who had participated in or supported the Revolution began to question whether the state's gender policies genuinely reflected Islamic ideals of justice and dignity (Badran, 2005). Out of this tension emerged a heterogeneous field of reformist practices. Feminist scholars and activists reinterpreted Qur'anic verses on gender; challenged patriarchal legal norms; collaborated with reformist clerics; and fostered public debate through journals such as *Zanan*, edited by Shahla Sherkat. Political figures like Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani and Jamileh Kadivar amplified these discussions, while grassroots movements began to demand concrete reforms in marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance laws. Islamic feminism gained legitimacy precisely because it spoke from within the discursive universe of the Revolution while opposing its patriarchal outcomes. Publications such as *Zanan* played an instrumental role in disseminating feminist interpretations of Islamic law and theology. By inviting religious scholars to comment on issues such as women's eligibility for the presidency, the magazine created a platform for internal critique that reached thousands of readers. These discussions did not simply expose legal inequalities; they educated a generation of Iranian women to read religious texts critically, to challenge patriarchal rulings, and to imagine a different Islamic future. Rather than casting gender equality as a Western import, Islamic feminists framed it as part of an indigenous ethical tradition within Islam. By grounding their critique in Qur'anic hermeneutics rather than secular universalism, they constructed a powerful bridge between religious identity and women's rights, making gender justice both theologically meaningful and socially resonant in the Islamic Republic (Moghadam, 2002).

4. Transforming Law, Ritual, and Everyday Life: Islamic Feminism as a Means to Deconstruct Violence

Islamic feminism emerged as an internal critique of the post-revolutionary legal and moral order, its transformative impact became most visible in the domains of law, ritual practice, and everyday social norms. These spheres—marriage, divorce, custody, ritual leadership, and cultural expression—had long been shaped by patriarchal interpretations of the *fiqh*. The Islamic Republic's ambition to return to "authentic" Islamic law reinstated classical jurisprudential models that subordinated women within family and social life. (Gheisari & Vali Nasr, 2006). Yet, by the 1990s, this very effort to "restore" Shar'ia provided a platform through which women activists and scholars exposed the historical contingency of these rulings, their epistemic foundations, and their incompatibility with contemporary Iranian realities. Islamic feminism thus confronted a form of structural violence embedded in the legal system. Gender inequality was naturalized through the claim that patriarchal rulings expressed divine will. Feminist scholars and activists countered that these rulings were not the direct words of God but interpretations produced by male jurists situated in specific historical and cultural contexts. This distinction—between revelation and interpretation—enabled women to challenge the theological legitimacy of discriminatory laws without resorting to secular or anti-religious frameworks. The consequences of this internal critique were particularly evident in the realm

of family law, a long-standing battleground for women's rights. As documented by Mir-Hoseini, Moghadam, and others, the post-revolutionary revival of classical Shar'ia resulted in significant setbacks: early marriage reappeared; unilateral male divorce was reinstated; and custody laws once again favored fathers. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, both institutional and grassroots efforts to reform these laws began to surface. During the Rafsanjani presidency and the period of post-war reconstruction, demographic pressures, economic realities, and the rapid rise of women's educational attainment made the strict enforcement of classical jurisprudence increasingly untenable. Legal reforms did not emerge because the state embraced a feminist agenda, but because women's activism, shifting social dynamics, and internal contradictions within the system rendered change unavoidable. One of the most emblematic examples is the reform of child marriage (Halper, 2005). Classical jurisprudence allowed the marriage of girls who had not yet reached puberty with parental consent. The revised law required civil court approval for marriages under age fourteen, thereby limiting patriarchal authority and acknowledging the need for institutional oversight. Although far from abolishing child marriage, this reform marked a symbolic rupture: it represented the state's first explicit recognition of the tension between classical *fiqh* and contemporary social conditions. Similarly, reforms in divorce law signaled a shift in the balance of power. Before 1992, men could divorce unilaterally and without justification, while women faced nearly insurmountable barriers. The 1992 revision mandated judicial involvement in all divorces, imposed arbitration, and required husbands to fulfill all financial obligations to their wives—including *mehr*—before a divorce could be finalized. These measures did not eliminate structural inequality, but they constrained arbitrary male authority and introduced procedural protections that strengthened women's bargaining position. The evolution of *mehr* itself illustrates how Islamic feminism reworked legal norms from within. Traditionally conceived as a contingency payment granted to the wife upon divorce, *mehr* was reinterpreted and renegotiated through feminist activism. In its reformed version, *mehr* became due immediately upon marriage, even though payment could be deferred at the wife's discretion. This shift enhanced women's financial security—sometimes excessively so, as exorbitant *mehr* sums occasionally led to the imprisonment of men unable to pay. The social complexities surrounding *mehr* reform underscore a broader truth: victories achieved through Islamic feminist reinterpretation often generate new tensions. They reveal that gender justice cannot be secured through legal revisions alone. Economic structures, class differences, and cultural expectations intersect with legal norms in ways that make equality an ongoing, negotiated process rather than a definitive achievement.

Beyond legal reform, Islamic feminism also transformed the domain of ritual authority and religious practice—areas traditionally reserved for male scholars and clerics. Although classical Shar'ia does not explicitly forbid women from leading other women in prayer, such practices had not been institutionalized. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s, women increasingly assumed roles as leaders of congregational prayers for female audiences, particularly in schools (Maghazei, 2017).

These developments may appear limited in scope, but their symbolic value is significant. Ritual leadership embodies religious authority; by occupying this space, women challenge centuries-old assumptions about who has the right to interpret sacred texts and guide communities. Such changes also function pedagogically: they teach girls and young women that religious expertise is not inherently male, and that interpretive authority can be shared.

Similarly, family courts were restructured to include women judges as "consultants" or advisors, making women's presence mandatory in legal deliberations affecting family matters. Though these women lacked full judicial authority, their presence disrupted the monopoly of male perspectives within the legal system. It signaled a recognition—however reluctant—that gender justice requires institutional representation.

5. Resisting as an Everyday Practice

Islamic feminism also operates through everyday forms of cultural resistance. The restrictions on women's public singing, for instance, represent a form of symbolic violence that polices female presence and expression. While women are formally prohibited from singing solo before mixed audiences, they continue to participate in private performances, all-female concerts, and music schools. Increasingly, the internet amplifies their voices, allowing them to publish performances on platforms that escape state control. This everyday resistance illustrates an important dimension of Islamic feminism: it is not limited to elites or formal institutions. It manifests in classrooms, digital spaces, artistic practices, and informal gatherings. Each instance of transgression—singing, interpreting texts, questioning clerics—functions as a micro-practice of peacebuilding. By asserting agency in small but meaningful ways, women destabilize the symbolic order that supports gendered violence. One of the most innovative expressions of Islamic feminism is the emergence of public theological dialogue between clerics and laywomen. An illustrative example is the practice observed in the *Masjed Jameh* of Isfahan, where young mullahs engage with visitors, including women, answering questions about religious rulings and interpretations. When a young woman challenged the prohibition on women singing, the cleric responded not with rigid legalism but with an appeal to individual discernment and "critical thinking." Such interactions reveal a shift in the religious landscape: women are no longer passive recipients of religious knowledge but active participants in shaping its meaning. The cleric's acknowledgment of personal critical judgment reflects the broader hermeneutical opening created by Islamic feminist discourse.

5.1 "Open Access" Feminism: How Knowledge and Science Became Female in Iran

With women comprising more than sixty percent of university students in Iran (Hejazi, 2023), educational institutions became pivotal sites for the formation of feminist consciousness (Mehran, 1992). Fields such as law, religious studies, and particularly science and technology allowed women not only to challenge patriarchal family structures but also to enter professions—journalism, law, academia, and scientific research—where they could shape public discourse and policy. Higher education thus functioned as a conduit through which women gained interpretive authority, social visibility, and political leverage. The rise of the internet at the turn of the new millennium dramatically amplified this dynamic. Online forums, blogs, and later social media provided unprecedented opportunities for women to exchange interpretations, debate theological questions, and document their experiences of discrimination

and resistance. (Azizi, 2023) Digital platforms democratized religious knowledge by weakening the traditional monopolies of clerical authority, thereby reducing hierarchical power structures that can exacerbate social conflict. These educational transformations unfolded alongside profound demographic and cultural shifts in post-revolutionary Iran. As scholars such as Poya and Maghazei have shown (2005; 2017), the decades after the Revolution witnessed rapid urbanization, a sharp decline in fertility rates, and a substantial rise in female literacy. This demographic transition carried significant implications: women married later, had fewer children, and increasingly participated in public life as economic actors and professionals. Such changes exerted pressure on classical gender norms and demanded new interpretations of Islamic law. The "modern Iranian family" no longer resembled the patriarchal extended household presupposed by traditional jurisprudence; instead, it reflected emerging ideals of individual choice, mutual partnership, and shared aspirations for mobility and self-realization.Islamic feminism played a crucial mediating role in this context. Rather than rejecting religious identity, feminist activists translated women's changing social experiences into an Islamic ethical vocabulary. Principles such as justice ('adl), compassion, and equity were reframed as foundational to the Qur'anic message. Concepts like qiwāma (male guardianship), mahramiyat (gender segregation), and nushūz (marital disobedience) were reinterpreted in ways that affirmed women's autonomy and dignity. This adaptive hermeneutics softened tensions between modern aspirations and traditional norms by providing culturally resonant frameworks for negotiation rather than confrontation. In this sense, Islamic feminism fostered a culture of nonviolent transformation. Change emerged not through rupture or rejection but through debate, interpretation, and ethical critique. One of its most significant contributions to peace-building lies in its reconfiguration of Islam's moral imagination. By insisting that justice and equality are central to the Qur'anic message, feminist scholars expanded the ethical horizon within which conflict is understood. This movement toward ethical pluralism destabilizes the epistemic foundations of patriarchal violence, shifting authority from rigid jurisprudence to dynamic interpretation, and from hierarchical control to dialogical engagement. The result is not the secularization of Islam but its moral democratization. Religious commitment becomes compatible with gender equality, critical inquiry, and social justice. This ethical horizon carries profound implications for peace, for it undermines the rationalities that legitimize violence against women and sustains forms of coexistence grounded in dignity, reciprocity, and mutual respect.

6. Zan, Zendegi, Azadi and the New Feminist Trajectories in Iran

The most recent phase of Iranian feminist mobilization reaches its fullest expression in the *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* ("Woman, Life, Freedom") uprising, which crystallized decades of hermeneutical innovation, legal struggle, and sociocultural transformation. As detailed in *Iran, donne e rivolte* (Hejazi, 2023), the 2022 movement was not a spontaneous eruption but the culmination of shifts long underway: the expansion of women's education, the democratization of religious knowledge, demographic change, digital connectivity, and the gradual erosion of the Islamic Republic's moral authority. The death of Mahsa (Jîna) Amini, a young Kurdish woman detained for "improper veiling," ignited an uprising that condensed interlocking forms

of oppression—gendered, ethnic, generational—and illuminated the widening gap between state power and society's lived realities. What distinguishes *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* from earlier waves of activism, including Islamic feminism, is the centrality of embodied resistance. The body emerged as the primary text through which dissent was articulated: hair cut in mourning and defiance, unveiled faces confronting security forces, young women standing on car roofs, arms raised against the machinery of repression. These gestures redefined the politics of visibility. In a system premised on the regulation, disciplining, and erasure of women's bodies, appearing publicly became an act of radical self-affirmation. The uprising created a new "grammar of presence," where visibility—once controlled by the state—became the medium of revolt. The movement's slogan—rooted in Kurdish feminist struggles and resemanticized by a new Iranian generation—offered a political anthropology of its own. "Woman" named the terrain upon which state power inscribed itself; "life" evoked the vitality stifled by authoritarian rule; "freedom" articulated the horizon toward which resistance moved. This triad captured the collective transformation unfolding on the streets: protests were no longer only demands for legal reform but existential claims to dignity, autonomy, and the right to appear. The Kurdish origin of the slogan, marked a turning point in Iran's political imagination: for perhaps the first time, a nationwide uprising adopted a conceptual vocabulary forged at the margins, signaling a more plural, intersectional understanding of subjectivity and justice. Digital circulation amplified this reconfiguration. Videos of women burning their veils, teenagers removing headscarves in schoolyards, and mothers speaking the names of their murdered children produced a transnational archive of defiance. The movement's aesthetics—its gestures, its songs, its portraits of martyrs—travelled across continents, turning Iranian resistance into a global feminist iconography. Diasporic mobilization became not simply an expression of solidarity but a second stage of the uprising, extending its visibility and sustaining its moral momentum even as the state intensified repression inside Iran. Yet the movement also revealed structural constraints. Despite broad participation, deep economic crisis, and the ideological exhaustion of the regime, the coercive apparatus of the Islamic Republic remained intact. Elite fragmentation did not reach a tipping point; security forces did not defect; and political alternatives lacked institutional footholds. Still, *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* transformed the landscape of Iranian subjectivity. It inaugurated a new political generation—digitally connected, culturally hybrid, strategically inventive—that rejects both the patriarchal structures of the Islamic Republic and the binary frameworks inherited from the 1979 Revolution. The uprising's refusal to appeal to state institutions, its emphasis on joy, intimacy, mourning, and everyday courage, and its creation of micro-spaces of solidarity signal a transition from reformist critique to a broader reimagining of political life. From the perspective of religion, conflict, and peace, the movement offers three key insights that conclude this article's trajectory. First, it demonstrates that structural violence grounded in religious discourse can be contested not only through legal reinterpretation but through embodied, affective, and aesthetic forms of resistance. The uprising exposed the fragility of a political theology that relies on women's veiling to sustain its legitimacy. Second, *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* extends the ethical project of Islamic feminism by insisting that justice, dignity, and freedom are not abstract ideals but lived practices enacted through bodies, voices, and collective memory. Third, it reframes peace as the creation of worlds in which visibility is not punished, difference is not feared, and gendered bodies are not sites of state domination. In this sense, *Woman, Life, Freedom* is not only a political uprising

but an epistemic event. It marks the emergence of new forms of knowledge-making grounded in experience, solidarity, and public presence. It continues the long struggle that Iranian women have carried forward for more than a century, yet pushes it into a horizon where the question is no longer how to reform existing structures, but how to imagine life beyond them. The movement does not offer a ready-made solution to conflict; rather, it opens a space in which justice-oriented futures can be collectively conceived and enacted. As such, it stands as the latest—and perhaps most profound—manifestation of women's role in reshaping the moral and political foundations of Iranian society.

7. Conclusions

Across more than a century of Iranian history, gender has functioned as the primary medium through which religion, political authority, and national identity have been articulated, contested, and reimagined in the Iranian context. From the Qajar encounter with Western modernity to Pahlavi state feminism, from the post-revolutionary reconstruction of Shar'ia to the emergence of Islamic feminist critique, and finally to emerging nwe movements such as Zan, Zendegi, Azadi, women's bodies and voices have been central to the production and deconstruction of both symbolic and structural violence. The genealogy traced in this article demonstrates that religious discourse in Iran has never been a static determinant of conflict, but a dynamic field in which actors negotiate meaning, authority, and justice. Islamic feminism revealed the interpretive plurality inherent in the tradition and cultivated new educational, legal, and ethical practices capable of reducing conflict through dialogue, reinterpretation, and the democratization of knowledge. The *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* movement extends this trajectory into the present, transforming embodied resistance into a new political grammar in which dignity, visibility, and freedom redefine the very conditions of coexistence. Taken together, these historical and contemporary movements show that peace in Iran cannot be imagined as mere cessation of violence through secularizing forces; it must be understood as the ongoing work of creating social, legal, and epistemic spaces in which gendered bodies are no longer instruments of state power but agents of ethical, religious and political transformation. In this sense, the struggle of Iranian women across generations offers not only a critique of religiously sanctioned violence but a blueprint for culturally grounded, nonviolent futures

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