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## "Woman, Life, Freedom": A Movement in Progress in Iran

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## "Woman, Life, Freedom": A Movement in Progress in Iran

### Abstract

On September 16, 2022, a new movement began in Iran. It shows the potential to be a serious uprising. The death of an Iranian woman in the street in Tehran, the capital of Iran, due to being beaten by morality police because she was wearing an unappropriated hijab sparked the uprising. Her death was a result of wearing an "inappropriate" hijab. This was an excuse that turned on people's anger not only because of hijab but also because there are many other combinations of causes to bring out people for protest. This movement was started because people were dissatisfied with how the government managed the whole system and the use of pressure to control people, especially women, in different aspects of their lives. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," which has been used in all of the demonstrations that have taken place both inside and outside of Iran, shows what the Iranian people exact need, woman's rights, the ability to provide at least essential living requirements, and the possibility to talk against dissatisfactions. Now "Woman, Life, Freedom" has become a movement.

### Keywords

"Woman, Life, Freedom," women, hijab, Iran, movement, Mahsa Amini

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## **“WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM”: A MOVEMENT IN PROGRESS IN IRAN**

**Arastoo Dabiri**

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### **ABSTRACT**

On September 16, 2022, a new movement began in Iran. It shows the potential to be a serious uprising. The death of an Iranian woman in the street in Tehran, the capital of Iran, due to being beaten by morality police because she was wearing an unappropriated hijab sparked the uprising. Her death was a result of wearing an “inappropriate” hijab. This was an excuse that turned on people’s anger not only because of hijab but also because there are many other combinations of causes to bring out people for protest. This movement was started because people were dissatisfied with how the government managed the whole system and the use of pressure to control people, especially women, in different aspects of their lives. The slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom,” which has been used in all of the demonstrations that have taken place both inside and outside of Iran, shows what the Iranian people exact need, woman’s rights, the ability to provide at least essential living requirements, and the possibility to talk against dissatisfactions. Now “Woman, Life, Freedom” has become a movement.

### **KEYWORDS**

“Woman, Life, Freedom,” women, hijab, Iran, movement, Mahsa Amini

**M**AHAS AMINI, a 22-year-old woman from Iran’s Kurdistan region, died in detention on September 16, 2022, after being detained for wearing her hijab incorrectly (Rouhi, 2022). According to reports, Tehran’s morality police beat Amini to death. Her death sparked a wave of nationwide protests that continue strong at this time of this writing (Leah Rodriguez, 2022).

Iranian women are protesting against the oppressive laws that have reduced their rights since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The protests have significant ramifications since they inspire women’s rights movements in other Muslim nations. The demonstrations mark the start of a new revolutionary age in Iran. Since the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011, Muslim women have fought for peace in their nations while trying to claim their freedom. These protests gave women’s movements in the Middle East a new face. However, today’s demonstrations in Iran differ because women are leading them. They are claiming the opportunity to define and drive change for Iran’s future (Bazafkan, n.d.).

Iranian women have participated in educational, social, and political activities alongside males for many years. Society has not always been ready to accept their activities, often out of concern for women’s safety. Following Mehsa’s murder last fall, people were reminded of their suffering. This time the uprising is lasting longer and is more serious. There is broad support from the men of the society, who are demonstrating the willingness of the community to support such a movement.

The current uprising movement's slogan, "Woman, Life, Freedom," was inspired by the Rojava Kurdish women's revolution. Kurdish women fighters of the Women's Protection Unit, YPJ2 (Yekîneyên Parastine Jin), attracted significant attention in Western Europe and the United States after the triumph in Kobane, northern Syria, which had been under Islamic State (IS) siege since September 13, 2014. A picture of the YPJ fighter known as the "Angel of Kobane" with blond hair, went viral and came to represent the fight against the Islamic State. The women of the YPJ were praised for their fight against the Islamic State. They were portrayed as upholders of a Western secular legacy against radical Islam in the Middle Eastern (Şimşek, 2021).

The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" is yelled in Iran to protest against patriarchal thinking and the intellectual mistreatment of women by religion. The slogan is being used to protest against the unfair social policies against women and the systematic eradication of their rights following the 1979 revolution. It boasts the autonomy of women in their struggle against the hijab and raises the awareness of society of their need for equal rights (Bazafkan, n.d.)

### ARE THE PROTESTS A MOVEMENT?

An answer to the question: "Are the protests a movement?" is complex because the situation is still developing. The dynamics do, however, seem significantly different from what we have seen in previous protest waves. This is a brand-new idea. The sizable "green revolution," pro-democracy movement of 2009, called for an accountable administration. Even if some other irate individuals joined it, the urban contemporary middle class predominated. (Hakakian, 2022). Then came the 2017 revolt, in which various socioeconomic groups—including unpaid workers, creditors, and farmers experiencing a drought—rose in protest simultaneously across the nation while articulating distinct sectoral demands. The 2019 uprising went further; many protesting groups, particularly the impoverished and lower middle class, showed a high level of togetherness. Their primary demands were related to the economy and cost of living.

This most recent movement has progressed further. The theme of "Woman, Life, Freedom" has united the urban middle class, the middle-class poor, slum dwellers, and people of multiple ethnic backgrounds, including Kurds, Fars, Azeri Turks, and Baluchis. Significantly, women are a key component of this movement. The diverse identities of the participants set this movement apart from earlier ones. The priority of women and their demand for human dignity indicates a paradigm change in Iranian mentalities. This is unheard of in contemporary Iran. Individuals are reclaiming their shattered lives, lost youth, repressed joy, and dignity they have been denied. A movement to recover life is underway. People believe a government administration run by senior clerical men has denied them the right to live regular lives. They think that although these men have colonized the people's lives, they are distant from them (Kohan, 2022).

The idea of taking back one's life is potent. Every Arab revolutionary knows by heart the famous lyric of Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi: "If one day, the people demand life, then destiny will have to answer," which captures its depth (Elbousty, 2013). Reclaiming life is a common demand in this movement. In terms of subjectivity, it is clear that a "collective pain" and a "collective claim" have been formed, causing various social groups to experience and share it and take action on it. The movement appears to have entered a revolutionary episode with the development of the "people"—a super-collective in which divisions of class, gender, nationality, and religion temporarily disappear in favor of a larger good goal.

Regarding the initial spark and the start of street protests, there are parallels between the current revolt in Iran and the revolutions of the Arab Spring. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi sparked widespread uprisings in Tunisia due to the tyranny he experienced and the murder of Khaled Said in Egypt due to police torture. Following these uprisings, Hosni Mubarak was deposed in Egypt within 18 days, and in Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted within 28 days. Said and Bouazizi represented the persecution that many Egyptians and Tunisians had experienced. The demonstrators in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as those in Iran, all value human dignity. However, there are also significant differences with Iran. The separation and antagonism between the majority of the population and the clerical leadership in Iran are far more powerful and profound than in Tunisia or Egypt due to the Iranian clerics' efforts to conquer everyday society. In Iran, unlike Tunisia or Egypt, oppressive ideological and political surveillance invaded people's daily lives and even their intimate lives (particularly women's). The Taliban government in Afghanistan has the only monitoring apparatus that can be compared to Iran's. Even Saudi Arabia's despotic authorities have started to modify the Wahhabi system of policing citizens' public lives. The fact that women are acknowledged as a transforming "subject" and the "woman question" is a tactical point of emphasis in the struggle distinguishes the present revolt in Iran from those in Arab nations. The main rallying cry of the current Iranian protest movement is "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Bayat, 2022).

### **THE MEANING OF "WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM"**

The slogan for Iranian women, "Women, Life, Freedom," highlights the value of women in both political leadership and the interior workings of society and families. The presence makes the connection between freedom and the advancement of women's liberation of women in management roles in the government. Cutting one's hair and removing the headscarf are symbolic actions against the oppression that targets women's bodies, identities, and desires in society. These actions are also part of a more extensive social performance. It should be mentioned that Iranian women's street campaigns in recent days have brought together many social and religious groups, kindling men's support for women's rights. This has resulted in the transformation and enlightenment of Iranian society (Lythgoe, 2022).

The demonstrations by women are a warning against the Islamic government's ideological teaching, which aims to spread their revolutionary idea of using women, their identities, and their bodies as weapons in the struggle against the West. For more than 40 years, the Islamic government supported education that portrayed women as the property of males, shielding them from modernism and imperialism. Still, its primary purpose was to restrict women and prevent their ascent to social power. The Islamic government victimized women in Islamic civilization by enforcing hijab laws, oppressing women, denying them fundamental rights, and infiltrating the family system with religion as a weapon to defend Islam (Bazafkan, n.d.).

### **"MAN, HOMELAND, PROSPERITY": A SLOGAN TO MATCH "WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM"**

One of the traits of the current movement and ongoing progressive revolution in Iran is to resist sex segregation which has been enforced for forty years.

The movement started because of the suppression of women's rights. The protesters have added the slogan "Man, Homeland, Prosperity" to "Woman, Life, Freedom" to show that people have more objectives than overcoming sex segregation. Iranian men in the street support the new slogan, and women use it to show they appreciate

the brave men's actions. Recently the song "Baraye" by Shervin Hajipour won a Grammy award. In this song's lyrics, "Man, Homeland, Prosperity" slogan is included. The song was composed in the first days of the movement based on people's wish to answer the question "why are you protesting?" and "baraye" in the Persian language means "because of."

In a world where despite legislative guarantees, speeches, and advertising for legal equality between men and women, there are still challenges in open societies and democracies to capture the interest of the general public, lawmakers, and the media. Titles like "the first women's revolution" or "the women's revolution" are frequently used, but what is happening in Iran is a singular rising accompanied by innovative and one-of-a-kind initiatives. One of them is the swift globalization from Iran of the slogan's fast completion. In supporting protests outside of Iran, protesters use both slogans.

The Iranian feminist movement has long lamented the lack of male support for women's rights and initiatives. The voices of protesting men have always been greater in the unabated demonstrations in Iran and even in the "Green Movement," whose principal purpose was to mobilize the middle class and whose symbol, of course, had nothing to do with the show votes in the election (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023).

One of the most crucial national self-awareness tools is the addition of the phrase "Man, Homeland, Prosperity." This perspective shows why there is a pressing need for unity and integration. It entails taking back the core of a society in which the Islamic Republic could see itself and its factions as the only determining and decision-making force, imposing artificial divisions and fostering social disintegration. The effects of the Islamic Republic's existence are not limited to social problems; in the modern world, poor decision-making also impacts diverse topics, such as traffic, air pollution, and public health.

This movement exposes social concerns that are deeply ingrained in society. The movement's primary focus is also on considering the facets of everyone's (men, women, children, teenagers, etc.) social expectations. Liberties enjoyed by people in the twenty-first century, such as freedom of speech, opinion, dress, and social, economic, and artistic expression, were disregarded for forty years.

## ADOLESCENTS AND TEENAGERS IN THE STREETS

Although it may come as a surprise, many young people are in the streets during the uprising. In general, youth and youth politics are relatively ephemeral and erratic. We may occasionally observe extraordinary activism while sometimes observing despondency, lethargy, and blasé attitude. However, there is a reason for this inconsistent behavior. In general, "youth features," or young people's physical aptitude, nimbleness, vigor, and future orientation and education lend themselves to a distinctive propensity for street politics and radical activism. More than 28% of young people (aged 15 to 29) participated in the revolt in Tunisia, which is unusual given that uprisings typically involve 1% to 8% of a nation's population. [citation/reference needed] However, because they are in a lower position in the social and political power structure, typically headed by older males, young people are prevented from meaningfully contributing to decision-making because they are viewed as immature and emotional. They should defer to their elders (young women especially suffer more from such treatment). Young people become despondent, disheartened, and resentful of politicians and "politics" due to the government's patriarchal attitude. They retreat into their worlds where they work to create spaces for self-expression and



self-empowerment through artistic and technical creativity, future planning, breaking social norms, or criminal activities.

The youth in Iran were quite active during a few presidential and parliamentary elections in the late 1990s and early 2000s when there was some competition among candidates, and there was hope for change. When they believed the elections were rigged and there was little hope for change, they sought sanctuary in their own world, in friendship groups, online, and in their “non-movements.” This allowed them to realize their lifestyle and find a method to guarantee a transition to an adult future. Playing games is not the only thing you can do online. They are exposed to the outside world and gain new coping mechanisms, information, and values. They also learn about the life in the outside world and develop an awareness of how poor they are. And as a result, young people became even more isolated from the outside world and the oppressive clerical control mentality. These days, the gap between the ruling class and the youth—half of whom are female—is so broad that it seems as though they are on different planets. Therefore, it is not surprising that the youth and adolescent “non-movements” have now blended into the widespread political upheaval in which the young play a more significant radicalizing role (Bayat, 2022).

### EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN'S PRESENCE

In general, there have been several barriers to those who want to continue their education in Iran, including the isolation of Iranian educational institutions, a lack of access to journals, and a scarcity of reliable sources of information (Constitution, n.d.). For Iranian women, these concerns are particularly challenging because women were not allowed to study in many engineering fields. As a result, it takes time for them to find their genuine educational interest and for the job market to accept them as an engineer. This is why it takes time for Iran's society to adjust to significant change.

Religious leadership in Iran has been exceptionally patriarchal and sexist intellectually and structurally. Therefore, it is not surprising that women's dissent and resistance started as soon as the 1979 revolution began. Iranian women persisted in their opposition for decades by using their “art of presence” in public to combat patriarchy and misogyny. They have attempted to organize and establish coordinated campaigns whenever possible, but the government did not allow female activists to meet in their homes.

Millions of women have been ridiculed, threatened, and detained by morality police and security personnel in public places and government facilities. According to a police report from 2006, 1.3 million women were stopped in the street and handed official citations during the eight months of the government crackdown on “bad hijabis” (women wearing loose headscarves) (Alexander, 2016). Over 150,000 women were detained during a three-day raid the following year. (Alexander, 2016). These assaults brought to Iranian minds pictures of the Israeli army degrading Palestinians. But the Iranian women's resistance against this attitude persisted. In the process, they have created new social norms and physical realities, such as the hijab being a choice rather than a requirement and public display. Because of the death of Mahsa Amini, a remarkable political revolt has arisen in which women have taken a significant role in improving their status.

But the “woman question” is not the only issue at stake in this movement. This protest movement's inclusive nature extends beyond just women. Numerous more underprivileged, despised, and downtrodden social, religious, and ethnic groups and classes have been welcomed. There is a perception that women's independence paves

the way for the liberation of everyone, including males and the underprivileged (Bazafkan, n.d.). In other words, the demonstrators now feel the same anguish and recognize a higher purpose that unifies them all. This universal good appears to be represented by “Woman, Life, Freedom” (Bayat, 2022).

The obligatory hijab represents the most blatant form of official oppression against Iranian women. Contrary to previous protests, these rallies are well received by the wealthy and the poor, urban and rural, young and elderly, male and female. The unparalleled unity across ethnic communities and regions across the nation was what was most impressive. Roya Hakakian observed that “no one can foretell how a revolution starts” in her article for the *Atlantic* (Lythgoe, 2022) Nobody can predict when a single act of injustice will be enough to make a populace’s rage triumph over their fear. She stated that most Iranians thought that Amini could have been them or, at the very least, a female member of their family, which is why it touched so close to home for most Iranians. When a woman may be detained, humiliated, and slain only because of the manner she wore a headscarf, “the knife reached the bone,” to borrow a phrase from popular Persian culture.

The environment in which Amini’s generation grew up was distinct from earlier generations. After the Iranian revolution, many children and teenagers were raised so that many were ambivalent in their behavior or had to hide a part of their family’s past, including political and social activities (Delijani, 2022). This controlling and self-censoring behavior can be seen in generations born in the early years after the Iranian revolution and can be traced even into adulthood. Yet today, teenagers and young people have more (not even free) access to knowledge, which has positively impacted their behavior and given them more bravery to criticize and fight.

Although the youth have not personally experienced revolution or war, they were nonetheless plagued by repression, corruption, and international sanctions. The oldest among them will remember the Green Movement of 2009. A decade later, “Bloody November” and the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 are important memories. The COVID-19 epidemic affected the youngest members of this generation during their pre-teen and teen years. Due to ideology-driven policies that resulted in insufficient testing, bans on Western vaccines that hampered medication distribution, and scant lockdown procedures, many Iranians believe it was mishandled. After years of harsh sanctions, the worst of which was brought on by Iran’s nuclear program, many Iranians are now left to ponder if they could have avoided misery by choosing a more cautious political course.

## CONCLUSION

Over many years, the people of Iran, particularly women, have been forced to contend with social, political, economic, and educational obstacles. The imposition of religious regulations alone is insufficient to maintain order in a protesting community. Young people and women are now educated to the point where they cannot accept being pushed around and are rising against unjust acts. The tragic loss of Mahsa Amini served as a sad justification for the recent movement in Iran. This movement was not solely in response to the hijab law; it is in response to many pressures people have felt in recent years.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Arastoo Dabiri** is an Iranian-German author, born in Iran. He earned a master’s degree in dramatic literature in Iran and spent ten years working for Iran’s national television and radio



(IRIB). He created documentaries, most of them on social issues. Then he moved to Germany. He worked as a cameraman in Hamburg and had an online radio program in Farsi. He organized cultural, and social activities, such as film reviews, discussions, and dramatic readings. He published four books in Germany.

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