International Journal of Middle East Studies (2023), **55**, 777–785
doi:10.1017/S0020743823001460

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

"A Nation in Turmoil, A Field in Crisis: The Upshots of Woman, Life, Freedom"

Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet

Department of History, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA
Email: fks@upenn.edu

By now, it is well known that the murder of the Kurdish woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, last fall sparked nationwide protests in Iran. Aside from Jina, many other young protestors were killed, imprisoned, or permanently disabled, as security forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran began blinding demonstrators by firing rubber bullets at their eyes.[1] These ghastly scenes were accompanied by other disturbing and violent acts that included the raiding of universities, sexual abuse of students, targeting of minority populations, and shockingly the execution of young men for their involvement in these fracases.[2] The Woman, Life, Freedom (Persian: *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*; WLF) uprising, which erupted in response to gender discrimination in the Islamic Republic, promptly embraced other social causes. What began as gender protests amplified people's strident cries against political repression in Iran. Despite raising awareness of a range of sociopolitical problems in Iran, the gender focus of this movement remains its singular achievement. This uprising,whose slogan (Kurdish: *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*) gained inspiration from the struggles of Kurdish women fighters, has put gender issues center stage and restored women's presence as primary agents of change in Iranian society.

The fight for women's rights has a long and volatile history in modern Iran. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement embodies, until now, the culmination of these struggles. In 1936, the poet Parvin E'tesami (d. 1941) composed a piece aptly entitled, "Woman in Iran" (*Zan dar Iran*) to mark the occasion of unveiling.[3] For months the country had anticipated the enactment of Reza Shah's directive enjoining the removal of the veil. Foreign diplomats in Iran wrote about these changes in their private correspondence. A Society for Women (*kanun-e banovan*) arose to inculcate modern secular values.[4] For E'tesami and many of her generation and class, the veil stood as the quintessential symbol of women's denigration. The salience of Islamic attire, and its denunciation, came to embody the country's troubled transition to a more secular society during those years. E'tesami wrote with intentional

[1] Elahhe Afkhamnejad, "Ocular Injuries in Iranian Protesters," American Academy of Ophthalmology, 18 January 2023, https://www.aao.org/young-ophthalmologists/yo-info/article/ocular-injuries-in-iranian-protesters.

[2] United Nations, High Commissioner to Human Rights Council's Special Session: "Iran Must Stop Violence against Peaceful Protesters, Release All Those Arrested, and Impose a Moratorium on the Death Penalty," UN Human Rights Council, 24 November 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/11/high-commissioner-human-rights-councils-special-session-iran-must-stop-violence.

[3] For interesting and important discussions of E'tesami's background and poetry, including reflections on skepticism about her authorship, see Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 102–25.

[4] Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Patriotic Womanhood: The Culture of Feminism in Modern Iran, 1900–1941," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (2005): 29–46, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30037660.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hyperbole that, before the unveiling movement, "none like women had lived in darkness for centuries" (*kas cho zan, andar siyahi qarnha manzel nakard*). Even women's grievances, she bemoaned, fell on deaf ears. E'tesami enumerated the long list of deprivations, from access to education to the absence of recognition of their legal rights, which Iranian women had endured for centuries.[5] Unbeknownst to E'tesami, this battle would be played out many more times in the course of Iran's modern existence.

E'tesami had grown up in Iran at a time when the country toyed with secular modernity. From the early days of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, Iranian modernists had called for women's empowerment. The forces of tradition and modernity battled one another not only over dress, but education, employment, and voting. Haunted by women's lack of agency, E'tesami celebrated the unveiling directive because for her this act represented the removal of various barriers to women's upward mobility in Iranian society. For others, mainly conservative families and religious figures, the unveiling decree was a "rape of Islamic tradition."[6] Conservative women found their freedoms curtailed because they did not feel comfortable venturing into the streets unveiled. Following the fall of Reza Shah in 1941, his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, moved away from mandatory unveiling and gave women the choice to veil. Many women promptly opted to re-veil during World War II.[7] However, after the war, veiled women rarely attained leadership roles in Pahlavi Iran.

Despite these controversies, many other Iranians embraced such changes. Not all did so out of coercion or in blind imitation of the West, as is sometimes posited.[8] Many young women and men welcomed social customs that normalized their interactions in public and that flouted moral (religious) judgments on sexuality and commingling. The tragic life of Persian poet, Forugh Farrokhzad (d. 1967), was a case in point. As Farrokhzad tenderly wrote in these verses:

> I have sinned a rapturous sin
> beside a body quivering and spent.
> I do not know what I did O God,
> in that quiet vacant dark.[9]

Were such impulses, expressed so openly by Farrokhzad, strictly the result of flawed Westernization? Or did they also convey Iranian efforts to break free of suffocating social conventions that necessitated at least a partial rejection of tradition and religious conservatism?

Women writers and social advocates grappled with the implications of gender autonomy in Iran. More than a decade after her untimely death, E'tesami's collection of poems was reprinted for a fourth time in 1954, with a forward by Iran's poet laureate, Mohammad Taqi Bahar, known as Malek al-Sho'ara. That the worth of E'tesami's poetry had to be acknowledged by a prominent male scholar divulges the pervasiveness of patriarchy in different eras of modern Iran. Perhaps it is even more significant that the collection opens with an inclusion of two photos of E'tesami—one of her wearing a headscarf (identified as the

[5] Parvin E'tesami, *Divan-e Parvin E'tesami: Qas-a'id, Mas-naviyat, Tamsilat, va Moqatta'at,* 4th ed. (Tehran: Chapkhaneh-e Majles, 1333/1954), 153–54.

[6] United Kingdom, The National Archives, FO 416/94, Enclosure in no. 36, Consul Urquhard to Butler, Tabriz, 3 February 1936.

[7] Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800-1988* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), chapters 5 & 7. Also, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "The 'Bridge of Victory': The Allied Occupation of Iran and its Consequences," in Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele, eds., *Iran and Global Decolonisation: Politics and Resistance after Empire* (London: Gingko Press, 2023), chapter 1.

[8] For context regarding these conversations, see Asghar Fathi, ed., *Women and the Family in Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), Introduction; and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender and Revolution," in *Theorizing Revolutions*, ed. John Foran (London: Routledge, 1997), 144.

[9] Forugh Farrokhzad, *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figures 1 and 2. From E'tesami, *Divan.*

poet's last photograph taken in January 1941) and the other, in which she is unveiled but wearing a hat, from February 1936, after the promulgation of mandatory unveiling—to emphasize not only her journey, but a nation's odyssey, toward this monumental, yet contested, cultural shift (Figs. 1 and 2).

In both images E'tesami has covered her head, with a comparable amount of hair showing. The question of head covering then was not just about hair, or its exposure, but the representation of body covering (or its absence), which continues today.

The Woman, Life, Freedom uprising throws into sharp relief these chronic culture wars, especially as the 1979 Islamic Revolution runs its course and unwittingly gives birth to another cataclysmic movement. These ongoing, if hushed, protests may be the sparks of the first revolution begun by women and led by women, but they will not be the last. For those who contend that the term "revolution" no longer pertains to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement (given the standard definitions of revolution offered by male political theorists such as John Locke, Karl Marx, and Crane Brinton), its supporters rightly retort that this revolution has already achieved the impossible: it has overturned mindsets. This shift has occurred not only among the ruling elite in the Islamic Republic, but also among some who romanticized or interpreted the re-veiling of Iranian women as a welcome and universal "return to self" (*bazgasht beh khish*).[10] Some women undoubtedly donned the

[10] Beth Baron, *Egypt As A Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

veil to express support for the Islamic Revolution and against the policies of the Pahlavi state, but many also did not. Still others moved away from their original positions and interpretations.

It bears remembering that most revolutions do not succeed overnight, as shown in the revolutionary movements of Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt in the early twentieth century, all of which were years in the making. Egyptian nationalists, for example, pleaded their case for independence to an unruly Great Britain at the end of World War I. When they were rebuffed, protests flared up, and the wives of the nationalists played a visible role in leading Egypt's fight for independence, which was finally granted in 1922 – three years after the protests had first appeared.[11] In other words, revolutions do not have a clear timeline and can take years to come to fruition. In addition, despite the active involvement of women, none of these revolutions made gender politics their primary message. This was also the case in Iran of 1979.

Contrary to the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, the Islamic Revolution played out as a manly revolution. Although women participated fervently in the protests,, its prominent figureheads and ideologues were male intellectuals and ʻulamawho had experienced alienation in post–World War II Iran. As historian Nikki Keddie avers, "the key role of such rootless young males"—men who had left rural communities for cities, struggled economically, and found more cultural affinity in traditional social centers such as bazaars and mosques—contributed to the outcome of events.[12] Finally, the 1979 revolution was manly because of the proud public pairing of bellicosity and power, which gave the revolutionary state an opening to recast gender relations and to cauterize secular and civic values. By contrast, in WLF, the manly tropes have changed, as not only women but young men, have experienced gender violence, bodily torture, and sexual assault.[13] Figures such as Majid Reza Rahnavard who stood by Iranian women in this fight paid the ultimate price as they bravely faced their executioners for the last time. A young male musician, Shervin Hajipour, sang in a soft, doleful voice a touching tune, "Baraye" (meaning "For" or "For the purpose of," which articulated in simple verses the lost hopes and yearnings of an entire generation.[14] A far cry from the bristling songs of 1979, "Baraye" became a plea to the global community to recognize the simple demands of suffering Iranians. In this way, the Women, Life, Freedom movement overturned the stereotypical manly tropes that male protestors had defiantly and combatively proclaimed during the Islamic Revolution.

In 1997, as scholar Haleh Esfandiari (who in 2007 was put in solitary confinement for 105 days in Evin Prison) observed:

> Behind [philosopher Ali] Shariati's fulminations against the supposed artificiality and superficiality of the rouged and lipsticked Western woman, and the emphasis both he and [Shiʻa theologian Morteza] Mottahari placed on female modesty and the woman's role as mother, wife, and homemaker, lay a discomfort with the idea of the career

[11] Nikki Keddie and Yann Richard, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, updated ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [2003] 2006), 228.

[12] Akhtar Safi, "Iranian Protesters Sentenced To Death Endured Weeks of 'Gruesome Torture,'" IranWire, 27 January 2023: https://iranwire.com/en/prisoners/113135-floggings-electric-shocks-rape-iranian-protesters-sentenced-to-death-endured-weeks-of-gruesome-torture. Also, Tamara Qiblawi, Barbara Arvanitidis, Nima Elbagir, Alex Platt, Artemis Moshtaghian, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Celine Alkhaldi and Muhammad Jambaz, "How Iran's Security Forces Use Rape to Quell Protests," CNN, November 21, 2022: https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2022/11/middleeast/iran-protests-sexual-assault/index.html.

[13] To listen to the song "Baraye" with English subtitles, see Music of Fortune, "Shervin Hajipour—Baraye," "New Iran Anthem," YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxEBq6tJM0M.

[14] Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 36. For information on Esfandiari's background, see "Haleh Esfandiari," Wilson Center, accessed 5 November 2023, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/person/haleh-esfandiari.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> woman and male-female equality. But their conservatism was not immediately evident to their followers.[15]

In 1966, Motahhari had famously written for the women's journal, *Zan-e Ruz* (Today's Woman), a publication that highlighted secular and Westernized values for Iranian women and youth. Such publications were criticized by some for objectifying women. In his writings, Motahhari articulated his perspectives on gender relations in Iran and Islam, reaffirming his conservative positions. However, he did so at a time when few prominent religious scholars engaged openly in mainstream public discourses about women and culture in late Pahlavi Iran.

For decades, a generation of Iranian rebels expressed sympathy for the ideologues of a revolution that often played out as violent, misogynist, and intolerant. Some did so because they believed in its promises, while others became the beneficiaries of a regime that created new elites out of formerly disenfranchised populations. But over time the regime also gave shape to sizable bands of dissenters, malcontents, and disaffected youth. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement signifies the scathing indictment of a growing rank of regime opponents and their resounding rejection of many aspects of the ideologies and outcomes of the Islamic Revolution. It does so by centering the protests on women's rights, gender rights, and human rights. WLF has even extended these conversations to the rights of schoolchildren like Kiyan Pirfalak, who had their precious lives cut short as they found themselves in the crossfire of these protests. It gives voice to the rights of elementary and teenage schoolgirls, such as Nika Shakarami and Sarina Esmailzadeh, who were killed, leaving unfulfilled their longing to experiment openly with fashion, hairstyles, and socializing. The youth emerge as the heroes and symbols of a singular movement that still unites countless Iranians inside and outside the country despite expected political bickering and ongoing power struggles. They have shown that a previous generation's entreaties to "return to self" have deprived them of the freedom to define that authentic self.

The problematic dichotomy of Islam and the West has not adequately explained the complexities of women's choice in veiling or the nature of women's participation in Iranian society. When Ali Shari 'ati contended that his vision of return to self (*bazgasht beh khishtan*) was coupled with a reformed Islam,[16] he did not anticipate how his idealization might be perceived as limiting in gender-specific contexts. In Iran, gender inequities were rooted in paternalistic structures. As I have argued elsewhere, at core remains Iranian women's struggle against authoritarianism and patriarchy, a fight in which women finally took the lead in 2022, unlike 2009, 1979, 1951, or 1906, when they were important but seemingly subordinate participants in the country's political upheavals.[17] At a time when women's liberties have receded worldwide, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement gives new meaning to Parvin E'tesami's words: "A veil [*pardeh*] was needed for the eye and heart but out of chastity / a despoiled covering [*chador*] was not the foundation of Islamism" (*chashm va del ra pardeh mi bayast amma az 'afaf/ chador-e pusideh bonyad-e mosalmani nabud*). No veil or verdict can forever hold back dissenters who have the weight of their convictions behind them.

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[15] Ali Shari 'ati, *Do Maqaleh: Bazgasht Beh Khishtan va Niyazhayeh Ensan-e Emruz* (n.p., n.d.), 13–17. Also available online at http://www.shariati.com/farsi/bazgashtbkhish/bazgashtbkhish1.html. For discussions of "return to self" in the context of the thought of Ali Shari'ati, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); and Arash Davari, "A Return to Which Self? ʿAli Shari'ati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 1 (2014): 86–105.

[16] Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[17] Djavad Salehi Isfahani, "Iran: The Double Jeopardy of Sanctions and Covid-19," Brookings Commentary, Op-Ed, September 23, 2020: https://www.Brookings.edu/articles/iran-the-double-jeopardy-of-sanctions-and-covid-19/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In 1995, I came across the fourth edition of E'tesami's poetry collection in a used bookstore near Tehran University. While pursuing my doctoral fieldwork, a part of which dealt with women's history, I experienced for the first time as an adult what it meant to live with compulsory veiling on a daily basis. Since leaving Iran in late 1980, I had not been forced to veil publicly. When my international school closed down in 1979, my parents enrolled me briefly in a local school that promptly enforced the Islamic Republic's new, though still unwritten, hijab rules. In the morning our outfits were scrutinized by the female school administrators in the schoolyard. Unaccustomed to experimenting with political fashion, I did not dare to object to or to challenge the new regime's dress codes. Though indignant about having to attend school veiled for the first time in my life, I quietly abided with the unwritten law.

Months earlier, the revolution had unfurled outside my school on Zhaleh Avenue. I was twelve years old. On that fateful February afternoon before the revolution's victory, my mother picked me up from school and out of fear forced a headscarf on my head. I often think back to that moment and what followed shortly after: the chanting of the sadistic slogan, "*Ya roosari, Ya toosari*" (Either a headscarf or a slap on your head), an indelible legacy of a revolutionary movement whose impulsive acts of violence and conflicting ideologies quickly put the disparate political actors at odds. Unlike the schoolgirls of today, we tolerated this abuse quietly because we did not know better. As schoolgirls, we lacked mechanisms for mobilizing against a change that some of us questioned and despised. We had not seen this form of state-sanctioned political intimidation and gender aggression before and did not know how to confront it. We were the silent sufferers of a movement carried out by a generation of sometimes solipsistic young (male) rebels who held a separate agenda. Some of these individuals now live comfortably abroad and enjoy the elitist and privileged circles they had once decried. Whatever their rationalizations today, particularly in light of the WLF movement, the extremist tenor of the 1979 revolution, and its misogynist underpinnings, remains undeniable—then and now. We saw and heard it as tweens, never entirely at ease with it. But ours was not the generation (or the voices) that mattered. Afterward, many of us grew up in the diaspora and embraced progressive values, but our politics became more empirical than ideological. We focused on survival in countries that did not always welcome us or that flattened our identities as obscurantist, extremist Muslims: paradoxically, the very image many of us had tried to shun even as we struggled to stay Muslim. At times, even our liberal allies assumed (wrongly, as it turns out) that, if we were unveiled or spoke unaccented English, we lacked cultural authenticity.

The Iran to which I returned in the 1990s, after more than a decade abroad, gave me a taste of life in the Islamic Republic. Exhilarated to be home again after years of absence, I was nonetheless apprehensive about how best to navigate this new Iran. On my first bus ride in Tehran, I experienced gender segregation. In public, I worried about inadvertently breaking some unspoken rule. My first trip back proved especially emotional, as I visited my father's gravesite for the first time. I had lost my father several months after the end of the Iran–Iraq War, in January 1989. Prior to his death, communication with Iran had become spotty. In July 1988, after the United States had shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing all on board, phone calls to and from Iran, my only mode of contact with my parents at the time, had broken down. Later, due to possible US immigration complications, and ambiguity over Iranian travel regulations that could have required male permission for unmarried young women to travel outside the country, I was advised against returning to Tehran to see my father on his deathbed. At the time, I had an academic scholarship in America, and my family worried about my forfeiting that award just short of graduation. The sorrow of not being able to bury my father, a scholar who helped to build the country's vaunted academic engineering programs, lives with me always and serves as a bitter reminder of the collateral damage that both the revolution and the Iran–Iraq War caused. This pain partly explains why I was never able to turn my back on Iran.

During my subsequent extended research stays in Iran, I visited state institutions and archives. I want to be clear that I frequented these spaces as a private citizen, unconnected

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to and unsupported by the regime's elite. At some places, I was questioned and searched before entry and told to fix my veil, even though I never wore makeup and faithfully covered my hair when frequenting such institutions. At other establishments, I was warmly embraced by the personnel. I quickly discovered that the order to "fix your veil" was often a show of power and authority, at times a way for a resentful security guard or official to humiliate women researchers, especially those coming from the West. At the National Archives and Library, as well as the Foreign Ministry Archives, I encountered many kind, decent, knowledgeable, and perceptive individuals who guided me in my research and who shared their meaningful life stories with me. At one archival center, a young widow told me of her struggles raising her family after her husband was killed in the Iran–Iraq War. At another, an employee shared with me her anguish at giving birth to a stillborn child. Such testimonies deeply moved me, and I found in these earnest conversations the justification for a career that my parents had never intended for me to pursue. I sensed the deep pull of a people and culture that I treasured. Although the laws of the Islamic Republic proved stifling at times (and not just because I was a displaced Iranian woman returning home from the West), I discovered that, despite our vastly divergent social and political outlooks and lives, my Iranian interlocutors who occupied low-level positions in government offices had also experienced loss and turmoil. We lived oceans apart, yet somehow, we grew close. In our conversations, we found much in common, and our humanity connected us in a way that our politics could not.

Forty years later, we observe this political fight from a different vantage point. The unresolved tensions of the 1979 Islamic Revolution are being played out in a new guise through the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. For some of us, the hurt that we have carried quietly has surfaced yet again. Although many of us remain far removed from our birthplace, forced out because of unwelcome impositions, we join the courageous women of Iran in this unfinished fight, to demand justice and to prevent future injustices against Iranians in the name of religion, morality, or politics. The uprisings in Iran that broke out after the undeserved murder of Jina Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Islamic Republic's morality police in September 2022 morphed momentarily into a global movement calling for women's freedom and an end to repressive regimes that have normalized the oppression of women. The spirited involvement of the Iranian diaspora in magnifying these protests exposes the deep pains and longings of the displaced community of Iranians abroad. Although first and foremost a global fight for freedom, tolerance, and gender rights, this movement is also collective catharsis for a scarred and wounded community that never imagined it could reunite, however temporarily and imperfectly, under the banner "Woman, Life, Freedom." In doing so, Iran's protestors have shifted the revolutionary paradigm.

This uprising, whose flames are still smoldering, faces the onslaught of security forces inside Iran. Outside the country, a different type of battle rages, with fault lines deepening among Iranian academics and activists, despite their intended and articulated goal of defying and in some cases even toppling the regime. The extreme name-calling and the targeting of certain women journalists and scholars, as part of a movement that embraces women, seems oddly dissonant and unwarranted. Many have questioned one another's intentions, as well as the motivations and connections of those who may appear to have ties abroad either with representatives of the Islamic Republic (reformist and conservative) or with sympathizers of the shah's exiled son, Reza Pahlavi. Unofficial cliques have formed around these ostensible political divides that have sometimes made it difficult to discuss sensitive academic subjects and the historical record with nuance. Regrettably, this intolerance exists on both ends of the political and academic spectrum.

Some of this bad behavior stems from frustration. Manyin the diaspora are tired of having our identities as Iranians or Iranian-heritage peoples loathed or criminalized. In addition, for Iranians abroad, it is not easy to criticize the Islamic Republic, given that the fear of retribution always exists. Many Iranian journalists and academics have family back home, and they do not want to risk the safety of their loved ones. Many Iran pundits also feel

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sympathetic toward the suffering mass of Iranians whose economic plight has worsened as the country's currency plummets and inflation balloons. They recognize, as does the global community, that the unprecedented sanctions against the Islamic Republic have undermined the most vulnerable in Iran. [18]

Still, the need for transparency exists. Who gains the right or opportunity to interview key political figures or to research sensitive subjects? How is access to privilege, information, and power defined and justified in these contexts? Such questions matter because universities, government entities, and the press endow certain academics, media personalities, and policy analysts with the authority to shape public debates.[19] When such perspectives or analyses repeatedly ignore dissenting opinions or are erroneously touted as majority opinions, ethical questions about media coverage and scholarship emerge. Iranians crave accountability as they search for a way out of this morass. Although the desire for answers and transparency appears valid, targeted attempts to malign certain individuals by linking them falsely to nefarious activities, all in the name of transparency and accountability, are not. Opposition and political groups outside the country, in demanding information about the flow of money; political ties; academic connections; and media relationships of Iran pundits in the US and the West, have exploited these basic demands by sometimes launching vicious and toxic campaigns of hate. Attempts at intimidation and silencing lead to self-censorship or a fear of open expression — as intended — concerns that are not unique to Iranian Studies. In contemporary Iranian Studies scholarship, some academics who question the rosy and triumphalist narratives of the Islamic Republic become easy targets of criticism sometimes intended to disguise personal animosities, while others have been unfairly criticized for pointing to progress, complexity, and positive social developments in the Islamic Republic. State resources, however, can tilt the balance of these conversations. Exclusionary crusades and shows of intolerance have taken place online and offline, among academics and nonacademics, as well as among those who condemn the Islamic regime or those who revile anything Pahlavi. Once again, individuals caught in the middle and seeking subtlety or other viable political alternatives are being silenced or forced to pick sides by the extremes of opinion, whether inside or outside of Iran.

The diaspora represents a spectrum of people and Iranian politics, from ideologically leftist activists and scholars to monarchists, Islamists, regime sympathizers and opponents, moderates, and the apolitical. It now includes not just the immediate generation of Iranians that fled the revolution, but also many who supported it. The diaspora encompasses religious, racial, and ethnic minorities, as well as members of LGBTQ populations. The diaspora consists of the rich, the poor, and the disabled. It includes individuals without labels, who, to paraphrase musician Shervin Hajipour, seek only commonplace pleasures: the freedom to love; to think; to breathe in clean air; to embrace Afghan children; to protect the environment. In other words, the diaspora remains a complicated entity, whose mirror image is reflected in Iranian Studies scholarship. Above all, the diaspora incorporates people who have strong and oppositional ideas about what is best for Iran. If the WLF movement has taught us

[18] In 2013, a report by the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania (https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=iranmediaprogram) found that

> Iranian journalists operate within a media-restrictive environment with limited editorial freedom—especially with regard to conducting investigative reporting or covering topics that could be deemed critical of the state, government officials, or Islam. Nevertheless, Iranian journalists strongly endorse the idea of public interest journalism and believe that serving and representing the public against the government is among their most important roles.

This report acknowledges media censorship in Iran as it charts the ways in which "Iranian journalists operate both within and despite an environment of heavy state oversight and restrictions."

[19] Jawad M, Hone T, Vamos EP, Cetorelli V, Millett C (2021) "Implications of Armed Conflict for Maternal and Child Health: A Regression Analysis of Data from 181 Countries for 2000-2019," *PLoS,* Med 18 (9): e1003810.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press

anything, it is that we need to listen to make sense of our dissenting voices. Democracy often requires open-mindedness, power-sharing, and a degree of compromise that follows heated disagreements. At the moment, there is little consensus on what shape a free Iran should take, and perhaps that is expected. These concerns remain on the minds of many Iranian scholars and citizens more than a year after the emergence of the WLF uprisings, as the country and its people search for different political alternatives.

Is it possible to remain academically balanced about such personal and politically charged topics? Maybe not. Our experiences of loss and trauma weigh heavily on our perspectives of Iranian politics, but our concerted efforts to bring balance and nuance in our analyses can move Iranian Studies scholarship away from its ideological silos. Perhaps not every subject can or should accommodate an integrative approach, but neither should academic scholarship stoop to "cancel culture." Writing two-sided narratives, or analyses of contested events from oppositional points of view, can bring subtlety and prevent willful, pernicious acts of historical erasure. As a field, Iranian Studies cannot thrive if opposing sides do not acknowledge one another or refuse to engage in civil discourse with diverse and competing audiences and bodies of research. At best, our scholarship and personal experiences can break down statist propaganda and guide us to a place of healing and humanity. The legacy of Iran remains thorny and fraught. Our quest for meaning and truth cannot begin or end with revenge, aggression, and violence, but rather with honesty, compassion, and tolerance. Our conversations in this roundtable show what is possible when scholars of different backgrounds and political proclivities come together to find commonality in their unique struggles and join under the banner of Woman, Life, Freedom. This solidarity extends to the current destructive conflict in Gaza between Palestinians and Israelis, as well as to the continuing war between Ukraine and Russia, as two prominent examples. Research has indicated that women and children are disproportionately affected and at risk in wars and conflict zones.[20] In the current Gaza war, thousands of Palestinian women and children were killed (and are still being killed) as a result of Israel's rapid-pace and large-scale indiscriminate bombing of Gaza and its brutal slaughter of civilians after October 7, 2023 — a death rate that "has few precedents in this century," according to experts.[21] In the ongoing conflict in Gaza, over a hundred civilian Israeli women and children were also killed and taken captive as hostages during the atrocious attacks of Hamas on that day. In 2022, after Russia's devastating invasion of Ukraine, it was found that "[i]t is women and children who are bearing the worst impacts."[22] The Woman, Life, Freedom uprising lingers as a message of hope, but reverberates still as a clarion call for the dire need to combat violence, intolerance, and inequality, especially toward women and children, and most urgently in times of war and political turmoil. It knells ominously as a global admonition.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank *IJMES* editor, Joel Gordon, for providing a prominent space for these reflections and academic conversations. His commitment to this effort comes through in all the pieces of this roundtable.

[20] Lauren Leatherby, "Gaza Civilians, Under Israeli Barrage, Are Being Killed at Historic Pace," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2023, updated November 30, 2023. For another account, see Brad Parker, "Israel's Slaughter of Palestinian Children Must End," *AlJazeera*, November 19, 2023.

[21] David Noriega, "Israeli Prisoner Release Shines Light on System of Detaining Palestinians Without Charge," *NBC News*, November 30, 2023, updated December 1, 2023.

[22] Emily Bare, "Russia-Ukraine War and its Impact on Women and Children," Geneva International Centre for Justice, Positions and Opinions, November 16, 2022.

Cite this article: Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet (2023). ""A Nation in Turmoil, A Field in Crisis: The Upshots of Woman, Life, Freedom"." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **55**, 777–785. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001460 Published online by Cambridge University Press