

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

Introduction: Activism, Scholarship, and Shaping History

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The idea for this roundtable emerged from a special session held at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) in Denver in December 2022. As nationwide protests swept over Iran, many MESA members voiced support for organizing a public conversation that addressed various aspects of the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF, *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) uprising. We thank MESA president, Eve Troutt Powell, for supporting this last-minute addition to the program. We are also very grateful to *IJMES* editor, Joel Gordon, for publishing these essays and enabling ongoing conversations about the WLF movement.

Many of the contributors spoke at the special session, whereas others have since been invited to share their perspectives in this forum. The Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) revolutionary struggle erupted in response to the killing of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, in September 2022 while in the custody of the Iranian morality police (*gasht-i ershad*). In Tehran, Iranian journalist Niloufar Hamedí covered the story of Jina's beating, hospitalization, and eventual death due to the brutal blows she endured at police hands.¹ Despite denials by the Iranian government, reports by eyewitnesses corroborated the abusive treatment of Jina.²

Outside Kasra Hospital, where Jina (Mahsa) had died, demonstrators gathered to remonstrate against her death. A day later, at her emotional funeral in Saqez, Kurdistan province, Iran, the protests continued. Agitators used the Kurdish slogan, “Woman, Life, Freedom”—*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*—which hearkened back to the struggles of Kurdish women freedom fighters, and which gained new life in its Persian rendition, *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*, in the ensuing months of the uprising.³

Following Hamedí's arrest, the story was picked up by Iranian journalist Elaheh Mohammadi, who was later imprisoned, and by many others. Quickly, demonstrations spread to other regions of Iran. Throughout the protests, many women removed their veil or cut their hair to reject the country's rigid hijab laws and enforced dress codes. University faculty and students, as well as schoolgirls, joined these fracasés, calling for gender liberties,

¹ Vivian Yee and Leily Nikounazar, “Their Reports about a Woman's Death Set Off a Revolt: Iran Put Them on Trial,” *New York Times*, 11 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/11/world/middleeast/iran-protests-journalists-trial.html>.

² Parisa Hafezi, “Iranian Woman Whose Death Led to Mass Protests Was Shy and Avoided Politics,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-woman-whose-death-led-mass-protests-was-shy-avoided-politics-2022-09-28>.

³ Seyma Bayram and Diba Mohtasham, “Iran's Protesters Find Inspiration in a Kurdish Revolutionary Slogan,” NPR, 27 October 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/27/1131436766/kurdish-roots-iran-protest-slogan>.

political freedoms, and eventually a rejection of the Islamic Republic. Actors and fashionistas joined the WLF protests in solidarity by cutting their hair or wearing outfits that displayed the Woman, Life, Freedom slogan.

The demonstrations unleashed a flurry of contentious exchanges on social media and in real life, unmatched since the creation of the Islamic Republic. Years of pent-up frustration erupted against organizations and individuals who had seemingly been anointed as unofficial representatives of the Iranian public. Such figures and organizations found themselves under unwelcome scrutiny as they tried to fend off accusations of being regime sympathizers. Angry Iranian citizens who sat sidelined for decades hurled ad hominem attacks at “Iran specialists” they believed had ignored, silenced, or misrepresented their views. Now, much to their surprise, the world was finally listening to them. Despite the sometimes aggressive and intolerant behavior of regime opponents and Islamic Republic loyalists, the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising opened conversations about the dark legacies of a revolution that several of its advocates (some of whom included activists-turned-academics) had avoided.

The issues around which Iranian women and other protestors have rallied remain unwieldy and complex. The pieces in this roundtable can only scratch the surface of these demands and their causes. They do not include everyone who we hoped would join, but they should be welcomed as a well-intentioned approach to understanding some of the mechanisms, histories, and emotions that are wedded to Woman, Life, Freedom. The contributions as a whole go beyond the value judgments of “good” and “bad,” or “accepted” and “unacceptable,” scholarship that have been at times endemic to Iranian studies, Middle Eastern studies, and their attendant disciplines and subfields for the past several decades. Ideas and thoughts that have been silenced and marginalized find a place here. A singular point of view does not exist, and fear of association does not have a place. The women included in this roundtable—representing diverse, unique, and stratified positions and communities—have a plethora of experiences and expertise from which to draw their hybrid and fluid, even if contested, claims.

Farangis Ghaderi leads the charge by emphasizing the Kurdish origins of the Women, Life, Freedom slogan and the unique struggles of Kurds throughout modern Iranian history. She reflects on the histories and aspirations of Kurdish protestors who became targets of repression during the uprisings of 2022. She emphasizes that calls for unity should not erase historical and contemporary injustices toward Kurds in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Maryam Alamzadeh follows by looking at the different ways and meanings of “normal” in the context of living in Iran. She explains some of the incursions, limitations, and embarrassments she has faced and allowed in trying to carve out a normal place for herself. She is also circumspect about a new normalcy produced by Woman, Life, Freedom.

Neda Bolourchi takes on the hot topic of whether the European Union can and should designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps a terrorist organization. Her legal analysis addresses not only the emotion of protestors and allies but calmly walks through the processes. She explains how and why Joseph Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief, is legally wrong in his assessment of the situation.

Sarah Eskandari applies the concept of internal colonialism to explain the struggles of protestors in the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings. She argues that Iran’s theocratic regime has colonized its dissenting citizens by imposing and enforcing Shi’a-centric laws and norms that many do not embrace. She invites Western academics to address issues of internal colonialism in their analyses of the Islamic Republic even as they denounce imperialism and Orientalism, topics that have sometimes distracted from astute analysis of the situation in Iran.

Yalda Hamidi produces an Iranian and feminist studies historiography to explain how examinations of the WLF uprising need to go beyond existing works. In doing so, she insists on the need to see marginalized groups and intersectional identities reclaimed in the center of academic research. Hamidi re-produces vignettes from marginalized communities to show the necessity of doing so. She asks whether the Islamic Republic embodies and governs like a

nation-state or an occupying force. In place of the existing forms of community and research, Hamidi insists on deconstructing Iran to rebuild it with democratic, inclusive, and antiracist values.

Nasrin Rahimieh tackles the issue of harassment in Iranian communities around the world. Clearly allies want to support the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement, but the lack of a justice and accountability mechanism inside Iran has produced negative effects outside the country. Some Iranians have accused others of collusion with the regime, accosted them in public, and waged online harassment and denunciation campaigns. Rahimieh looks at a moment when a former employee from the Office of the President of the Islamic Republic arrives in Canada and is hounded by an aggressive protestor. Rahimieh labels such actions a “politics of vengeance” and raises important ethical questions about intracommunity relations.

Sahar Razavi also tackles the topic of intracommunity relations but focuses on the United States. She unpacks the meanings of “*nayaki*” and the hateful impulses in such aggressive tactics. Razavi addresses tensions within the community and the dilemma presented by anti-democratic elements in a democratic movement.

Ladan Zarabadi argues that the coverage of Woman, Life, Freedom is an improvement over the cliché images produced through the Western, Orientalist images of Iranian and Muslim women. Yet she argues that the production of images in WLF remains reductionist, and she uses *Time* magazine’s Heroes of the Year issue to challenge such tendencies in anti-imperialist and postcolonial discourses.

Nahid Siamdoust shows the ways in which the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising has inspired new modes of cultural expression. Musicians and musical scores gave voice to people’s longings, frustrations, and hopes, and involved university students in unique acts of political resistance, performance, and musical production.

Finally, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet considers the contested histories of veiling and unveiling in Iran. She takes a page from the Persian poets, Parvin E’tesami and Forugh Farrokhzad, as she reflects on her experiences in Iran before and after 1979. She considers the WLF movement a forceful riposte to the manly tropes of the Islamic Revolution. By acknowledging, yet seeing beyond, the differences among Iranians, she regards the WLF as an opportunity to enable the political integration of a fragmented community and field, both in practice and in scholarship.

This roundtable models how different responses to the Iranian political crisis can be studied and analyzed together in an inclusive and introspective way. The contributors come from different backgrounds and represent diverse perspectives on the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and its political antecedents. We have tried to capture the intergenerational voices of Iranian women who have shaped this history; taken part in its contentious debates; and expressed their experiences of how this uprising has affected their activism and scholarship. Together, these pieces give texture to our collective.