


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

Internal Colonialism in Iran: Gender and Resistance against the Islamic Regime

Sarah Eskandari 

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

Appraising the roots of the Woman, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) movement requires a different framework of power: internal colonialism. Mexican sociologist Pablo Gonzalez-Casanova argues that internal colonialism results when the direct domination of foreigners over natives disappears, and the domination and exploitation of natives by natives emerges.¹ This process, I contend, has occurred in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the forty-year rule of Iranian clerical elites has subjugated a dissenting populace, especially women. The repressive gender practices of the theocracy in Iran have over the course of the past year prompted a unique internal anticolonial protest.

Scholars have used the concept of internal colonialism since the 1950s to explain unequal political relationships in South Africa, Latin American countries, and former British colonies to show the domestic exploitation of resources and identities, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities.² However, this theory has not received much attention in analyses of Iran or the Middle East. A common feature of internal colonialism is the presence of social relations based on domination and subjugation, in which a differentiated population is subordinated to the dominant power. In internal colonialism, the colonizer and the colonized can be racially and culturally the same or similar, as in Iran. However, the discourse of subjugation also maintains and legitimizes the dominance of one group over another based on factors such as ethnicity, race, religion, and gender. Relying on theories of internal colonialism, I argue that under the Islamic Republic—a state headed by Shi'a jurists—Iran has normalized gender discrimination through religious dogma. Through its rigid and politicized interpretations of Shi'a Islam, the state justifies a political theology that has subjugated and oppressed marginalized groups and gender identities, even as it acknowledges women's traditional role in society as mothers, daughters, and wives, and sometimes as individuals with basic human rights. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement articulates a break from this bondage of internal colonialism and coercive Islamization.

This framework offers new analytical tools for understanding the dynamics of power and resistance in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Internal colonialism, “as a special form of colonization outside a context of a [classic] colonial system” helps us better contextualize Iran's

¹ Pablo Gonzalez-Casanova, “Internal Colonialism and National Development,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 1, no. 4 (1965): 27–37.

² For example, A. Eugene Havens and W. L. Flinn, *Internal Colonialism and Structural Changes in Colombia* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Norma Beatriz Chaloult and Yves Chaloult, “The Internal Colonialism Concept: Methodological Considerations,” *Social and Economic Studies* 28, no. 4 (1979): 85–99; and Joe Turner, “Internal Colonialism: The Intimate Circulations of Empire, Race and Liberal Government,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 765–90.

current state of affairs.³ In Iran, a profound divide lies between how individuals must publicly manifest themselves and who they truly are, a reality compounded by the theocratic practices of internal colonialism. This distinction divides Iranian society into mainstream and alternative, or core and periphery, not only in regional and economic terms but also along cultural, social, religious, and gender lines. In this binary, individuals whose cultural practices, traditions, political viewpoints, or religious beliefs deviate from or challenge the dominant norms face discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization by the dominant core groups. The core monopolizes its “advantage through policies aiming at the internalization of the existing stratification,” as articulated by political theorist Michael Hechter.⁴

In the Islamic Republic, this rift manifests as an “us” versus “them” dynamic, shaped by the “institutionalization of sameness and difference.”⁵ The emphasis on religious, ethnic, racial, gender, and linguistic identities reinforces this process of “othering,” which becomes ingrained through economic disparities, lack of communication between core and peripheral areas, exploitation of low-cost labor, unequal living standards, restricted social mobility, and physical and psychological violence. Several protest movements, including the current Women, Life, Freedom movement, expose this power structure.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, one indicator of internal colonialism appears in the state’s Shi’a-centrism, exercised as a tool of control that marginalizes nonbelievers through exclusionary policies. Iran’s totalitarian Islamic regime justifies its Shi’a-centrism by upholding the notion of Islam as a universal religion intended to establish a unified Muslim community (*umma*) within an Islamic territory, or *dār al-Islam* (the abode of Islam). The Islamic Republic deems itself to be the true representative of Islam. It seeks to fulfill the Prophet’s vision of expanding the *umma* by bringing people under the banner of “*vilayāt-i faqih*” (guardianship of the jurist), an act that is often forcefully enacted.

The Islamic Republic’s desire for religious expansionism and its use of Shi’a-centrism as a tool of subjugation and exclusion can be understood as integral aspects of its practice of internal colonialism. In addition to religion, language and ethnic identity define its hierarchical system of exclusion, making the prospects of regional equality increasingly remote. Several scholars such as Alireza Asgharzadeh, Haidar Khezri, Kamal Soleimani, Ahmad Mohammadpour, and Ismail Beşikci Mohammed A. Salih, among others, have applied this model to explore the realities of internal colonialism in multiethnic societies by focusing on the communal experiences of Azeris, Turks, and Kurds in Iran and Turkey. Building on analyses of Kurdish scholars, Sarah Roy highlights how hegemonic powers have employed hindering strategies to impede internal economic development and structural reforms.⁶ This “de-development” process, as described by Roy, is being implemented in Kurdistan, a region inhabited by an excluded ethnic-nation.⁷

Khezri, Soleimani, Mohammadpour, and others have criticized the one-dimensional anti-colonial narratives of modern Iranian history despite their “all-inclusive sounding tone.”⁸ They question the Shi’i-Perso centrism of modern Iranian nationalism and its overemphasis on the “historical timelessness, uniformity and continuity of ‘the nation,’” as reflected in comparative literature.⁹ Khezri calls upon postcolonial academics to expand their analyses beyond Tehran and include other cities like Tabriz, Kurdistan, and Loristan. He challenges postcolonial scholars of Middle East studies, arguing that they have “erased the experiences of the subaltern and internally colonized stateless languages and cultures in favor of the

³ Robert Blauner, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” *Social Problems* 16, no. 4 (1969): 393.

⁴ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*, 9.

⁵ Riva Kastoryano, “Codes of Otherness,” *Social Research* 77, no. 1 (2010): 80.

⁶ Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995), 6.

⁷ Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “Life and Labor on the Internal Colonial Edge: Political Economy of Kolber in Rojhelat,” *British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2020): 742.

⁸ Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “Can Non-Persians Speak? The Sovereign’s Narration of ‘Iranian Identity,’” *Ethnicities* 19, no. 5 (2019): 931.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Middle Eastern dominant languages and cultures in a binary matrix: Western imperialism versus a colonized Iran/Islamic world.”¹⁰ In a similar vein Mohammad Salih develops the concept of “internal cultural imperialism” and employs internal colonialism to capture the imbalanced power dynamics and tendency toward cultural homogenization in Turkey. Both Iran and Turkey frequently resort to “emergency measures” and an “exceptional security situation” to maintain the subordination of non-core cultures.¹¹

Building on these concepts, I delve into the gender dimension of internal colonialism to argue that power structures and hierarchies between men and women can mirror the dynamics between colonizers and colonized peoples. Internal colonialism produces a particular form of racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence that denies the subjectivity of the internally colonized.¹² In Iran, internal colonialism affects gender dynamics beyond specific racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Whereas women from certain religious-ethnic minorities face particular challenges, Shi'a-Persian women who advocate for gender equality and oppose gender politics are treated as the “others’ other” too. This concept explains how the process of marginalization reinforces group identity and how women are central to this group identity, which serves to legitimize their disempowerment.¹³ Being the “other’s other,” women’s protests and uprisings in Iran have been labeled as a threat to the state, associated with Western colonialism, imperialism, and Zionism, as a way of disregarding and delegitimizing the protesters’ authentic struggle for secular demands.

Central to women’s concerns that gave rise to the current uprising is the hijab, which has played the most crucial role in the gender dimension of internal colonialism. The hijab has been viewed as an “emblem of resistance to colonialism,” an affirmation of indigenous values, cultural identity, and group integrity.¹⁴ Women have been regarded as most vulnerable to *gharb-zadegi* (“Westoxication”) and deculturation caused by Western imperialist culture. The political-cultural project of Islamization that took place after the 1979 revolution to transform Iran was seen as “incumbent upon the transformation of women.” This highlights the view of Iran as a colony of Islamization, with women playing a crucial role in this process. The imposition of the hijab and the reversal of family law were among the initial steps of Islamization. These changes also led to the contradictory and ambiguous nature of political and ideological changes that took hold after 1979. While the constitution affirms gender equality, it also includes a significant qualifier: the laws of Islam, which impose different regulations on women’s behavior compared to men. The mandatory hijab law was legislated in 1983, despite earlier indications by figures like Mehdi Bazargan, Iran’s first prime minister after the 1979 revolution, that there “would be no compulsory veiling in government offices” and even statements by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that women should be guided rather than forced to accept the veil.¹⁵

Recently, Mohammad Dehqan, the vice president for legal affairs, declared that the mandatory hijab is the symbol of the Islamic Republic and “without hijab, the Islamic Republic loses its true essence.”¹⁶ This statement articulates the position of the Islamic Republic on

¹⁰ Haidar Khezri, “Internal Colonialism and the Discipline of Comparative Literature in Iran,” *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparanda* 23, no. 43 (2021): 94.

¹¹ Mohammed A. Salih, “Internal Cultural Imperialism: The Case of the Kurds in Turkey,” *International Communication Gazette* 83, no. 8 (2021): 747.

¹² Turner, “Internal Colonialism,” 770.

¹³ Robina Mohammad, “Marginalisation, Islamism and the Production of the ‘Other’s’ ‘Other,’” *Gender, Place & Culture* 6, no. 3 (1999): 221–40.

¹⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 164.

¹⁵ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 175–77.

¹⁶ “Hijab is the symbol of the Islamic Republic; without it, the Islamic Republic is meaningless,” *Etemaad Online*, 13 May 2023, <https://www.etemadonline.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-9/612601-%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C>.

women that many state officials embrace. The hijab is portrayed as an immutable aspect of culture to safeguard the regime's core identity. Despite the regime's emphasis, more reform-minded Islamic scholars have argued for the dynamic and subjective nature of culture and the adaptability of laws to changing circumstances, including mandatory hijab rules. This interpretation of the law, referred to as "jurisgenesis," occurs within a cultural realm, despite the Qur'an being considered the infallible word of God.¹⁷

The state's rigid stance on the hijab has positioned secular women as uncompromising adversaries.¹⁸ The concept of internal othering in the exploitation of non-Persian identity, discussed by Soleimani and Mohammadpour, also applies to women as part of the regime's internal colonizing behaviors. The state's imposition of a specific identity, represented by an enforced hijab, has led to the criminalization of any civil disobedience or opposition, perpetuating the process of internal colonialism. This criminalization challenges reductionist views that downplay the significance of restrictions associated with the hijab. Women's bodies have become a platform for the exercise of power, and products of power shape values. The hijab uprising demonstrates the linkage between compulsory hijab and women's empowerment. It denies oversimplifying mandatory hijab by highlighting that some women "only" cover their heads partially, particularly among the middle class. Even if women no longer have to cover their faces, there is no measure of compromise. They fight against the in-between half-head/body hijab because the issue extends beyond the size of the cloth or what parts of the body it should cover. The problem lies in the symbolism of attire as a form of political control and the use of clothing as a "barometer of politics."¹⁹ The struggle against enforced hijab transcends the physical aspects of the garment and delves into the dynamics of gender, power, and resistance.

The patriarchal mechanisms to control citizens even affect day-to-day interactions among parents, neighbors, and friends. At times, people's micro-opinions reinforce the state's imposed ideology. Some citizens take it upon themselves to uphold these boundaries by admonishing those who deviate from them. The discourse of "rightness" and "morality" creates a perception that compulsion is synonymous with contemporary Iranian culture, perpetuating the idea that even in the absence of overt systemic patriarchy, it still exists within the cultural realm. Individuals assume the role of admonishers and issue warnings, threats, and punishments to those who transgress these cultural boundaries. Therefore, women's resistance and confrontations are channeled through the direct gaze of the state, while simultaneously targeting its institutions.

Women who challenge the mandatory hijab and gender inequity laws in Iran strive to dismantle entrenched institutionalized barriers that seep into their private lives. In this way, they refuse any compromise with patriarchy. They view the hijab as a multifaceted means of oppression and "homogenization," a tool of internal colonialism that visibly excludes women.

In the West, the fear of being labeled Islamophobic has hindered the recognition of Islamist politics as a tool of gender oppression in Iran. Orientalist portrayals of Islam and the demonization of Muslims as a benighted "other" have made some reluctant to speak out against the religious extremism of the Islamic Republic. However, the voices of women who suffer from Islamic rules need to be heard and legitimized as well.

The fight against mandatory hijab encompassed in the Women, Life, Freedom protests illustrates Iranians' frustration at not being heard and acknowledged, and at times being overshadowed by discourses about Islamophobia in the West. Burning headscarves during the movement symbolized the need for a balanced perspective that legitimizes both sides: listening to the voices of individuals who suffer under Islamic rules and the voices of

¹⁷ See Robert M. Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term," *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 1 (1983): 11.

¹⁸ Soleimani and Mohammadpour, "Can Non-Persians Speak?" 925.

¹⁹ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147.

Muslims who suffer from the negative portrayal of Islam in the West. Iranians' defiance is not against Islam itself but against religious extremism. They strive for a universally accepted everyday life, rejecting the regime's attempt to impose an "abnormal" life as the norm and challenging the misrepresentation of their struggles by the Islamic Republic. It is telling, however, that on the International Day of Combating Islamophobia (March 15), Amir Saeid Irvani, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, highlighted the need for international action and suggested that the current situation in Iran might exacerbate Islamophobia.²⁰

Iran's protesters firmly reject the state's discourse surrounding "rights," "norms," and "culture." They challenge concepts that perpetuate the idea of the "other" and rigid notions of chastity and honor. Many question the basis for labeling certain behaviors as "right" or "wrong" and firmly advocate for individual autonomy in personal matters. Despite facing fines, detentions, and various forms of restrictions, in addition to experiencing fear and stress, women resist the regime by refusing to comply with the mandatory hijab. This act of defiance has become one of the most visible forms of everyday resistance among Iranian women. As such, according to Mehrdad Darvishpour, a sociologist and university professor in Meldalen, *Women, Life, Freedom* can be viewed as a "super movement" (*abar jonbesh*) that goes beyond merely advocating for regime change.²¹ It confronts sociocultural, political, and patriarchal subjugation, challenging paternalistic attitudes and social discourses not only in Iran and the Middle East but beyond. *Women, Life, Freedom* is aligned with neither Western colonialism nor Islamophobia. Rather, it resists a unique form of internal colonialism through its complex messaging that shuns the silencing of Iranians.

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²⁰ "Iran's UN Ambassador Calls for More Action against Islamophobia," *Tasnim News Agency*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/03/11/2865974/iran-s-un-ambassador-calls-for-more-action-against-islamophobia#:~:text=Speaking%20at%20a%20high%2Dlevel,discrimination%2C%20and%20violence%20against%20Muslims>.

²¹ "Gender and Power in the 'Super Movemnet' of Woman.Life.Freedom," *Voice of Exile*, 7 December 2022, <http://avaetabid.com/?p=3702>.

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