

Dissenting to Transform: Iranian Female Students in a Prescriptive Educational System

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Abstract: In post-revolutionary Iran, female students confront systemic violence embedded within the educational system, from compulsory hijab mandates to ideological indoctrination. I examine how these realities perpetuate gender-based discrimination, restricting young women's rights and freedoms. The lens of Reproductive Justice theory reveals how authoritarian structures reinforce patriarchal norms through segregated classrooms, biased curricula, and direct repression. Though state institutions attempt to neutralize dissent, female students strategically leverage social media and underground solidarity networks to challenge institutionalized violence and advocate for social change. Iranian women's activism, seen in movements like *White Wednesdays*; *Women, Life, Freedom*; and *Lion & Sun Revolution*, reflects a broader pursuit of educational autonomy and bodily self-determination. Analyzing these campaigns using transnational feminist theory shows how Iranian female students transform educational spaces shaped by state violence into sites of resistance and empowerment.

The female-led revolution in Iran is fueled by over four decades of oppression, violence, and lack of accountability. Iranian men and women stand unwavering in the face of bullets and brutality because they recognize that a life without bodily autonomy, the right to self-expression, and economic and social stability is not worth living. Raising awareness is no longer adequate. Iranians unanimously demand systemic change through international organizations and governments: it is long past time for action.

— Armita, 18-year-old Iranian student — She's the First, Sixth Annual Summit, 2022

Iranian students have experienced years of harassment, threats, arrests, detention, and even being put on the Islamic Republic of Iran's list of potential targets for assassination. Beginning in early 1997, college students' politically dissident activism returned to Iran's political arena seventeen years after the Islamic Revolution. Effective student involvement in President Mohammad Khatami's campaign (from February to May 1997) was the first indication of the rebirth of a student movement (Mashayekhi, 2001). During Khatami's presidency (1997-2004), known as the reform period, political space was opened in post-revolutionary Iran. Iranian students became more involved in politics during the reform era by criticizing conservatives and advocating for more political freedom (Yaghmaian, 2012). From 1997 to 1999, Iranian students often advocated freedom of the press, freedom for political prisoners, better and more available housing, and better food in dormitories (Tohidi, 1999). In response to these protests and efforts at reform, the government of Iran turned to *securitization* to protect its state-sanctioned version of Islam. As Ahuja (2020, p. 194) explains, "securitization involves changes in a subject, system, or state to minimize potential risks or dangers that develop from particular social and political environmental contexts." Securitization involves safeguarding an object, in this case, the Islamic Republic's ideology, by adopting a future-focused approach that emphasizes short-term preventative actions to mitigate potential long-term risks. In this context, crackdowns on students and the press were an effort to secure Iran's regime from any future criticism, particularly with respect to its religious moralism.

On July 6, 1999, in an obvious act of securitization, the Islamic Republic's Parliament passed a stringent press law, giving authorities expanded powers to protect Islam from the perceived harms posed by dissenting journalists, some of whom were students. On July 7, 1999, the Special Court for Clergy ordered the shutdown of *Salam*, a widely read newspaper that

supported Khatami's reformist candidacy for the presidency. In response to the law and press crackdowns, Iranian students took to the streets in Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, and Esfahan to protest. This student movement is referred to as *Fajeh Kuye Daneshgah*, or "the tragedy of the university dormitory," an event that has been characterized as Iran's version of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, since at least seventeen students were killed on their university campuses or at their university dorms. Ezzat Ebarhim-Nejad, a poet, was killed in a dormitory. As of this writing, Saeed Zeinali, one of the first victims of this protest, is still missing. In addition, many Iranian students published articles objecting to the law. However, the courts shut down demonstrations, interfered in the publication of written protests, and at least ten writers and others, including writers and publishers Faezah Hashemi, Latif Safari, and Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, were convicted of "insulting the sanctity and tenets of Islam" or "forgery and offending Islam" (CPJ, 2000). Security forces then launched brutal attacks on the University of Tehran and Tabriz University. The attacks ended with several students killed or imprisoned (Golkar, 2015), with some still missing as of this writing.

Thousands of Iranian students nevertheless continued to play a substantial role in the social movements that were mobilizing in this increasingly repressive era, including the 2009 *Green Movement*. Also known as the *Green Wave* and in the West as the *Persian Spring*, the *Green Movement* became prominent following the contested Iranian presidential election in June 2009, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner despite an election that was widely recognized as fraudulent (Golkar, 2011). Still, the *Green Movement* had its roots in long-standing discontent and unhappiness with the government that had ruled Iran for the previous thirty years. Even with the most recent rebellious movement in Iran, known as the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement, which began on September 16, 2022, after Jina "Mahsa" Amini's death (at the hands of the morality police for violating women's dress code), high school and university students were again, notably, the first protesters. The morality police in Iran, known as the Guidance Patrol, which enforces their interpretation of Sharia law (i.e. Islamic social and societal law), had detained Amini, a Kurdish 22-year-old recently admitted to university, on September 13, 2022, for *improperly* donning her headscarf. Her relatives and the local media reported that in detention, morality police brutally beat her, and while still in police custody, she lost brain function and passed away three days later (Rights, 2022). After news of the tragedy spread, protests broke out all over Iran. Protesters were led by women from all classes and demographics, such as students in high schools and universities, grandmothers, and working-class groups. They cut their hair, tore off their headscarves in protest of the compulsory hijab in schools and universities, and took up the chant "women, life, freedom." From high school to college, young Iranian women raised their voices to express outrage against the many years of oppression and denigration women have been suffering.

Role of Women in Iranian Protest

Throughout Iran's history, and especially since the 1979 revolution, women and female students have been a significant part of social uprisings (Gheytanchi, 2022). During the 2009-2010 *Green Movement*, young girls and women were introduced to a new form of activism and political protest through social media. Under the influence of new technology, the internet and political movements grew in tandem, giving Iranian citizens a platform in cyberspace to advocate in some cases for — but more often against — the Iranian government. Women gained the most from these social media sites, finally having a place to voice their own articulation of cyberfeminism (Malekpour, 2021). As a former student, teacher, and staff member in Iran's

educational system, I also experienced gender oppression, having to live under the heteropatriarchal moralistic norms imposed by society and government institutions. Back in my time, there was less awareness of the pervasiveness of harassment by the system and even less of the means to push back and speak up against gender injustice. These discriminations continue to be normalized in Iran's academic and social setting by means of limited access to education, especially to equitable higher education (compared to that available to men), and limited social resources for women educators.

Trends of the last 25 years have shown that whenever the education of Iranian women approaches equity with that of men, the government will take definitive action to ensure that fundamental inequalities remain. Iranian women first outnumbered men in university entrance exam applications in 1998, a turning point that led to a quiet but ongoing shift in policy. To curb female acceptance rates in higher education and acting on the belief that men should retain dominance in both academia and the job market authorities introduced gender-based quotas aimed at limiting the number of women admitted to universities (Iranian Republic, 2020). By 2004, these quotas were officially applied to fields like medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy, despite strong opposition from women's rights activists. In 2013, the policy became even more explicit, with universities such as Allameh Tabataba'i assigning certain programs to men and others to women (Mehr News, 2025). Although the government has never publicly acknowledged quotas, reports confirm the National Organization for Educational Testing and key ministries continue to implement them, capping admissions by sex in many fields (Khabar Online, 2023). Ahmad Tavakkoli, a senior member of Iran's hardline Principlist faction, defended the policy claiming it protects family stability and aligns with women's own preferences (Iranian Republic, 2020). During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), officials cited concerns (limited dormitory space, female dominance in the job market, and social imbalance) as justification for maintaining gender-based restrictions (Radio Farda, 2007).

Iran's misogynist social and political context in which female students have been a critical part of contemporary-era Iranian social movements, echoing their historical role in past movements for justice. Iranian female students face systemic discrimination in education and limited opportunities for social and political participation due to state efforts to control their bodies through draconian morality policing. While the most recent uprisings in which women and female students play a central role do not explicitly foreground reproductive rights, they challenge entrenched economic and educational disparities that intersect with race, gender, and class and control women's daily lives, including bodily autonomy. Reproductive Justice theory, which examines how poverty, immigration laws, and state violence undermine reproductive autonomy, is critical to understanding the importance of Iranian resistance movements. Women protesting in Iran are addressing oppressions that ultimately infringe on their reproductive freedoms. Looking at Iranian protests through a Reproductive Justice feminist lens that refuses to disconnect fundamental rights from systemic oppression, I examine recent female student movements and the role of female students in Iran's ongoing social transformation, a topic overlooked in academic literature. I explore why female students take to the streets in their school uniforms, burn their school dress codes, and are sometimes killed for doing so, all in well-publicized activities, as was the case in the 2022 murders of Nika Shahkarami and Sarina Esmailzadeh, two female high school students murdered by the morality police during the *Women, Life, Freedom* protests. Sociological and cultural analysis of female-led student movements in Iran focuses on 1) the religious-political forces that shape the structure of education and schools in Iran and the resulting gendered social discrimination against girls and

women, and 2) the role of global cyberfeminism as an agent of reproductive justice in opening to female students paths and goals different from those of the state-run educational system in Iran.

Reproductive Justice Theory: A Demand for Women's Social Justice

The Reproductive Justice framework, developed by both Asian American and Black feminists in the 1990s, provides an intersectional lens for understanding how political, social, and economic structures, which, while not always understood in relation to reproductive health access, affect marginalized groups' reproductive autonomy and broader social experiences (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, 2017; Ross, 2017). Loretta Ross, a prominent African American activist, constructed the Reproductive Justice framework to expand the pro-choice conversation, dominant for a long time in the US, to include broader social and economic factors, enacting the concept of "calling in" culture (disagreeing without punishing) as an alternative to "calling out" culture (punishing because of disagreement) (Nelson, 2010). By addressing systemic issues, such as racial inequality, poverty, and healthcare access, that undermine reproductive rights, the Reproductive Justice (RJ) theoretical framework critiques mainstream reproductive rights movements for remaining too narrowly focused on abortion and contraception, (Ross & Solinger, 2017). RJ recognizes three core rights — the right to have a child, the right not to have a child, and the right to parent in safe and supportive environments — that are often grouped in human rights discourse with social and economic rights such as the rights to education and an adequate standard of living.

Social/economic rights are frequently compromised by intersecting oppressions like racism, sexism/heterosexism, and classism, as well as broader, related systemic factors such as poverty, immigration laws, and state violence (Morison & Herbert, 2018). For women of color, reproductive freedom is inseparable from issues of economic justice, healthcare, and education (Price, 2022). Reproductive Justice emerged as a response to the limitations of the feminist reproductive rights movement, which primarily emphasized individual choice while neglecting the lived realities of women of color and other marginalized groups, which present obstacles and inequities that interfere with or even deprive women of rights to family, health, education, and political participation. Ross and Solinger (2017) argue that White-dominated feminist movements generalized experiences of middle-class White women, overlooking the intersectional challenges faced by others. RJ, by contrast, encompasses broader social justice concerns, including environmental racism and economic inequality, all of which shape reproductive outcomes and thus should not be disconnected from those outcomes in movements for social change (Morison & Herbert, 2018). Broader application of the idea of reproductive rights to include social rights provides a lens for analyzing how systemic power dynamics influence reproductive and non-reproductive decisions (Morison, 2021). RJ's adaptability makes its splicing of human and reproductive rights relevant to global contexts, including the activism of Iranian female students (Price, 2022). RJ theory, therefore, intersects with Social Justice Theory, which advocates dismantling systemic barriers to equality and access (Daniel, 2021).

Iranian women face systemic discrimination in education and limited opportunities for social and political participation, all reinforced by gynophobic state efforts to deny them bodily autonomy in terms of what they can display of their bodies and how, by means of hijab, their bodies must remain separate from, and thus not equal to, those of males in public. In the context of analyzing the contemporary movements of Iranian female students, RJ offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how political and religious structures limit women's autonomy in

reproductive decisions, in education, and political and social participation. Social Justice Theory aligns with the Combahee River Collective's (1983) analysis of race, gender, and class oppression as foundations of identity politics, a position often credited with laying the foundation for RJ. In addition to stating their own clear theoretical principles and practical plans for cultural change, Social Justice theory and Reproductive Justice theory critique neoliberal policies that characterize reproductive rights as merely individual choices, often ignoring systemic inequalities that hinder access to vital resources like healthcare, employment, and education (Morison & Herbert, 2018). Exclusion from socially just treatment is evident in the Iranian context, where female students face systemic marginalization, enforced by morality police and other systems of securitization, that limits their ability to participate fully in social movements like the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement and political life more broadly. Application of RJ as a way to study female-led Iranian protests allows for exploration of gender-based discrimination and broader socio-political factors shaping the lived experiences of Iranian female students.

Schools: A Source of Oppression

The Reproductive Justice (RJ) framework emphasizes identifying sources of oppression as particularly relevant in understanding where discrimination begins. For Iranian women oppression often begins in the schools. The organizational function of any schooling structure is formed and deployed in a country's particular and distinct social context (Oplatka, 2004). The educational system in Iran, a tool of the theocracy that rules Iran, plays a crucial role in shaping the social and political views of young Iranians, with schools deploying tools for overt ideological indoctrination. For some historical contextualization of the education system in Iran, in 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the revolution that ousted the shah, tasked the schooling system with enacting "a revolution in values" because he and his allies viewed the revolution as primarily a cultural and ideological revolution rather than a political revolution (Mehran, 2006). Khomeini believed fundamentalist Islamic religious education should be a required component of the new educational system's curriculum and structure: what is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian educational system has undergone significant transformations, with the government using schools to instill its political and religious values, especially in girls and young women. Revolutionary securitization against the perceived threat that women represent to the Islamic Republic is accomplished not only through teaching Shi'a religious beliefs but also through architecturally sex-segregated education and societal institutions. Where it is not possible to keep females and males apart, segregation is accomplished by insistence on the physical separation created by enforced hijab. Indoctrination begins early, with textbooks and teaching materials systematically rewritten to reflect fundamentalist Islamist and anti-democratic ideals, such as the obligation of women to cover parts of their bodies when in public. Golnar Mehran (1989) highlights that school textbooks serve as key agents of socialization, ensuring that Islamist values permeate every aspect of education, from history and sociology to literature and religious studies. Curriculum portrays the government as the defender of Shi'a Islam against all competing viewpoints from religious minorities such as Jews and ethnic groups such as Kurds (Mehran, 1989).

The educational system uses religious and political propaganda via textbooks and other pedagogical materials and practices to maintain control over students, presenting alternative perspectives as threats to Islam and the nation. The headscarf as a key component of the religious code of hijab is another critical tool of power imposed on female students as a symbol of their submission to Islamic values and heteropatriarchy (Shirazi, 2019). Following Abu-Lughod, who

has cautioned against Islamophobic oversimplification of the meaning of hijab, I point out that requiring women to wear hijab extends beyond mere religious observance (Abu-Lughod, 2002), functioning as a form of forced political compliance within schools. Since the beginning of the revolution, the government's central authority has determined significant policies regarding education in Iran, which has a highly centralized political and ideological framework (Hallinger, 2017) that violate women's fundamental human rights. These policies include making head coverings a *requirement* for girls only and segregating educational spaces based on sex (Paivandi, 2012). The government also established various religious customs, such as communal prayer, to reinforce the schools' political and religious propaganda events. Another notable change in 1979 was establishment of the Educational Affairs authority, Omour Tarbiyati, tasked with imparting Islamist culture to students and forming their thoughts (Mohammadi, 2004).

In 1987, the parliament passed a statute that is regarded as a critical piece of legislation for implementing significant, state- securitizing reforms in Iran's educational system in the contemporary era. The law strongly emphasized ideological frameworks primarily based on Shi'a principles, presented as the national religion and the embodiment of the sacred order on earth. The most *holy* objective of the school, according to the law, is to prepare young Muslims to become "virtuous believers, conscientious, and involved in the service of the Islamic society" (Paivandi, 2012, p. 7). One of the initial political and intellectual stages toward Islamization under the 1987 law involved removing teachers who opposed the revolution to ensure only those who supported the new political order remained in the classroom. The Ministry of Education quite quickly and extensively reformed college/university faculties of education with a stringent admissions process and a heavy dose of Islamic education and religious practice in programs to train future teachers. The Ministry offices require candidates from all fields to take religious knowledge examinations as part of the recruitment examination (Paivandi, 2006). Additionally, several extracurricular activities in each academic year are planned to strengthen teacher loyalty to the established patriarchal culture. The schools organize over one hundred political and religious gatherings, *the days of God*, each academic year, including political rallies, rituals honoring martyrs, and commemorations of religious luminaries' births and deaths (Mohammadi, 2004). State-enforced education practices, understood as tactics of morality policing and, thus securitization, have severely undermined educational quality in Iran. As Payman (1996, p. 23) critically observed, "the educational system has experienced the process of so-called 'cultural revolution', and it has paid a heavy price and declined in terms of human power, level of scientific education, and research quality." Educational degradation has led to a system plagued by low academic standards, inadequate facilities, and a chronic shortage of qualified educators (Tavassoli, 1997). Systemic control imposed on schools ultimately serves to uphold a theocratic structure that restricts and oppresses women, shaping young girls' lives to align with a rigid, state-prescribed version of female identity, thus stifling their voices and potential.

Saeed Paivandi (2012) notes schools have been viewed as essential in building an Islamist, i.e., fundamentalist state, aligning students with the principles of Shi'a Islam and ensuring their adherence to the political ideology of the Islamic Republic. Resistance to this alignment is punishable in the extreme. This may be why, in 2023, when young female students began to challenge the revolution and its core values with such activities as demonstrations in classrooms, online activism, and public burning of their scarves, the Islamic Republic began targeting schoolgirls with attacks at girls' schools across Iran,. More specifically and horrifically, in February 2023, girls' schools across Iran faced a series of chemical attacks, where students reported exposure to chemical agents that caused severe symptoms like shortness of breath,

nausea, and even temporary paralysis. Despite clear evidence, and no such attacks on boys' schools, the regime denied responsibility and accused students and parents of exaggerating (Taheri, 2023). However, many believe the government orchestrated these attacks to terrorize young women who were striving for education, making it apparent that Iran's education system serves as an extension of state control over women's freedom and everyday lives.

State violence intensified further during the nationwide protests and strikes of January 2026, which were met with one of the deadliest crackdowns in the contemporary history of the Islamic Republic. According to human rights organizations, security forces killed tens of thousands of unarmed civilians across the country, including large numbers of students and schoolgirls participating in or affected by the demonstrations. More than 200 students were identified among the victims. The January Massacre illustrates the extent to which Iranian youth, and especially female students, have become central targets of state repression (IDC, 2026). For many families, classrooms became sites of mourning rather than learning, as countless children never returned home from school or back to their desks. Their absence remains part of the ongoing history of violence surrounding education, gender, and dissent in Iran. Such violent indoctrination was plainly an attempt to socialize female students into a marginalized, collective identity centered around Islamist revolutionary ideals, weakening individuality and ensuring conformity and securitization of the state (Razaghi et al., 2020). As Hayat Alvi (2022) explains, extremist groups often view women and even young girls as threats to religious and social order. Policies targeting women are tools of broader efforts to maintain male dominance and religious purity, because the typical role of women, in many societies, is one of engendering social norms and values in their socially reproductive roles in families. By embedding religious, political, and cultural values into every facet of education, the government shapes young girls' minds to align with its Islamist vision of a Shi'a Islamic state, marginalizing those who do not conform and thereby ensuring that the next generation of girls and women will align as well. Ultimately, the state can take even this limited education away, as government forces demonstrated by attacking college campuses in April 1980 (soon after the revolution) and driving them to close for three years (Mashayekhi, 2001). Forced closures continue in present times, and the threat is real and viscerally understood, a chilling tactic of state securitization. An Iranian female student highlighted the depth of enforced restrictions, reporting to VICE World News (2022) that "Women in Iran cannot choose their clothes, cannot choose the job they want, cannot get a divorce without their husband's permission, cannot marry without their father's permission, and cannot sing. During the *Women, Life, Freedom* protest, the Islamic Republic closed the doors of universities, arrested students, and shot them." Her testimony underscores how deeply embedded and oppressive gender-based restrictions are within Iran's educational framework, which openly penalizes women for expecting their rights and for seeking autonomy.

Cyberfeminism and the Education of Female Students

Schools in Iran function as spaces where girls and women are conditioned to accept a lack of fundamental human rights, fostering a broader social and political environment of systemic injustice. Educational institutions reflect the broader societal structure, preparing students for futures in which they will work in occupations deemed *acceptable* for women while establishing households, marrying, and raising children according to heteropatriarchal mandates of Shi'a Islam. Schools act as agents of socialization, ensuring that the next generation of Iranian women internalizes their roles as *ideal women* who refrain from demanding equitable pay, access to higher education, fair treatment in marriage, or an equal quality of life comparable to their male

counterparts. However, even as schools in Iran have become key sites for ideological indoctrination in the contemporary period, perpetuating the Islamic Republic's political and religious dominance by obviating women's reproductive rights and normalizing reproductive discrimination, the longer history of democratic participation has endured (Kaivani, 2019). Indeed, more recent efforts at indoctrination have largely failed, as demonstrated by recurring anti-regime protests. Over the years many students have demonstrated and now many students continue to demonstrate the failure of the policies of the Islamic Republic's 46-year attempt to produce a new generation of devout and dogmatic Islamists.

Despite all the political, cultural, and behavioral norms the Islamic Republic has been teaching its youth through textbooks and architectural efforts to create physically separate educational institutions for females and males, students have usually been first in line to exit the classroom and go to the streets to protest the regime and its repressive, gendered policies. The question then is "Why?" Why have so many students not cooperated with their Islamic studies in schools, while working adults seem more inclined to cooperate? Why has the education students have received for years in school, an education intended to ensure their fidelity to Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, had the opposite impact on their lives? Partial answer lies in the fact that other forces from outside Iran in different types of classrooms, forces that were not present at the beginning of the revolution, have helped students think and behave in ways opposite to their schooling. Social networking sites (SNSs) are foundational in increasing people's knowledge of international political issues (Shahwar & Student, 2025). Young people, especially college students, use social media for cyberfeminism, political activism, and social justice conversation (Alami, 2019) to feed the need and desire to seek equity for marginalized groups, including women. However, the Islamic Republic has repeatedly attempted to sever digital connections whenever youth-led movements threaten state authority, from the *Green Movement* (2009), to the 2017–2018 protests, to the 2019 fuel protests, to *Women, Life, Freedom* (2022), and most recently the 2025–2026 social media/internet blackouts.

Digital Repression and the Politics of Connectivity

The growing importance of digital spaces for political education and participation in Iran has been accompanied by increasingly sophisticated efforts by the Islamic Republic to regulate, surveil, and restrict online communication. As young people, particularly students and women, have turned to digital platforms to share information, organize collective action, and challenge dominant state narratives, cyberspace has emerged as a significant site of political contestation. Consequently, the Iranian state has increasingly viewed unrestricted internet access as a threat to its authority and has repeatedly employed internet disruptions, platform restrictions, surveillance technologies, and nationwide blackouts during periods of social unrest. The relationship between political dissent and internet control in Iran has developed over more than two decades. During the 2009 *Green Movement*, protesters used digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging to coordinate demonstrations and document state violence. In response, authorities blocked social media platforms, throttled internet speeds, and expanded digital surveillance. Similar strategies reappeared during the nationwide protests of 2017–2018 and the November 2019 demonstrations against fuel price increases, which prompted the government to implement one of the most extensive internet shutdowns in modern history, effectively disconnecting much of the country from the global internet for nearly a week (O'Neil, 2025). State disruptions limited communication among student protesters, reduced international visibility of state

repression, and demonstrated the government's growing capacity to isolate Iranian students and citizens from transnational information networks.

The *Women, Life, Freedom* movement further intensified state efforts to control digital communication. Following the morality police murder of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, social media platforms became critical spaces through which Iranian women and students documented demonstrations, circulated images/videos of state violence, and connected local struggles to global audiences. Digital platforms enabled forms of activism that transcended geographic boundaries, allowing participants to challenge state narratives and generate international solidarity. The movement demonstrated digital spaces could function not only as communication tools but as alternative educational sites where participants exchanged political knowledge, feminist critiques, and strategies of resistance. The significance of digital spaces for resistance and protest helps explain why the Islamic Republic has invested heavily in systems of digital control. Iran's National Information Network (NIN), often presented by state officials as a project promoting cybersecurity and digital sovereignty, functions as a centralized infrastructure that enables extensive monitoring, filtering, and restriction of online activity (O'Neil, 2025). Systemic attempts to control media access exemplify broader patterns of digital authoritarianism in which governments employ advanced technologies to strengthen political and educational control, monitor dissent, and enhance regime resilience (Conduit, 2025). Rather than rely solely on physical repression, contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly utilize technological infrastructures that allow surveillance and control to operate continuously and often invisibly.

Recent internet disruptions demonstrate the evolution of digital securitization strategies. During the June 2025 nationwide shutdown, Iranian authorities implemented a sophisticated service-level blackout that dramatically reduced access to the global internet while maintaining the appearance of normal network operations through stable routing infrastructure (Aryapour, 2025; Cui et al., 2026). Researchers documented extensive filtering, deep packet inspection, protocol restrictions, and selective blocking mechanisms that effectively isolated users while preserving state control over domestic communication networks (Aceto et al., 2026; Aryapour, 2025). VPN (Virtual Private Network) demand reportedly increased by more than 700 percent during the shutdown, highlighting citizens' continued efforts to circumvent censorship and remain connected to global information networks (Aryapour, 2025). Similarly, the January 2026 internet shutdown occurred amid widespread political unrest and demonstrated the state's continued reliance on digital repression as a mechanism of social and educational control. Analysis of the shutdown reveals extensive restrictions on communication infrastructure, further illustrating the central role that internet governance now plays in managing dissent, limiting collective mobilization, and inflicting huge damage on the education of Iranian students (Aceto et al., 2026). Repeated use of communications disruptions suggest that the state increasingly perceives digitally connected citizens, particularly politically active youth, as a significant challenge to its authority.

From a cyberfeminist perspective, efforts to restrict connectivity reveal the transformative potential of digital spaces. The state's recurring attempts to control internet access underscore the extent to which online platforms have become important sites for feminist knowledge production, community formation, and political resistance. For many Iranian women and students, cyberspace functions as an alternative educational sphere that exists beyond the direct control of state institutions. Through digital networks, participants exchange experiences, challenge dominant narratives, archive acts of resistance, and imagine alternative futures. The

state's investment in censorship and surveillance reflects not merely concerns about technology itself, but fears regarding the emancipatory possibilities that digitally connected communities can create. In this sense, cyberfeminism in Iran represents more than online activism; It constitutes an ongoing struggle over knowledge, visibility, agency, and the right to participate in shaping social, educational and political life. By disrupting access to digital communities, online learning spaces, activist networks, and transnational feminist discourse, internet blackouts attempt to limit not only political mobilization but also alternative forms of learning through which Iranian female students develop critical consciousness and collective agency. The internet and social media have been very powerful tools in educating Iranian students in ways that depart from Islamist indoctrination and have served as a crucial space for women to become social activists or to become involved in social movements, such as the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement.

In this era of rapid technological change, a new generation is emerging that is *location-aware* and that uses a *technology language*. Frequently, they are called *Generation Z*, or the *TikTok generation*, an age cohort that possesses more technical proficiency than previous generations (Cilliers, 2017). Social media usage has ingrained itself into the lives of the majority of individuals globally. Recent digital platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now X), and TikTok, are simple to use and highly engaging. Smartphones have made it easier to access social media applications, which make up a significant portion of teenage screen time overall (Shah, Das, Muthiah, & Milanaik, 2019). Nowadays, like their counterparts in other locations, most teenagers in Iran use social media and the internet. Most teenagers (80–90%) have access to smartphones that allow them to utilize social media and the Internet in their homes, schools, and communities (Ghorashi, 2020). Today's classroom is portable, open 24/7, and accessible through many anonymous features (VPNs and screen names). Social media can significantly aid adolescents' collaborative and self-directed learning (JinMao, 2014). Iranians now utilize the Internet and social media much more frequently as components of a networked society (Abolfathi, 2022). Therefore, students have far-reaching spaces to expand their learning beyond the confines of their classrooms. They can easily access vast information beyond their limited school textbooks and the spatialized and physical geographies of Shi'a state-imposed education. As a former Iranian student, based on my own lived experience with emerging educational and political technologies, I remember that, in technology courses in Iran, students often had to correct their teachers' mistakes during lessons.

Iran's restrictive educational system has not been able to compete with the mass media that students can access, especially media that is digital and available on the Internet. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 happened many years before the birth of Generation Z. Iran's Generation Z grew up differently than their parents did. Gen Z has access to social media, albeit somewhat regulated, and other ways to learn about events taking place abroad. Interacting with this more global virtual space, they are intolerant of isolation and of subjection to sanctions in Iran (Bahari, 2022). As a result, authorities can no longer force schoolgirls to wear compulsory hijab or stop them from singing and dancing in public, in part because young girls can watch girls in Hollywood and other international movies and series openly doing what Iranian girls are forbidden to do in public. Unsurprisingly, students have concluded they will not abide by gender segregation in Iran's schools, while other students around the globe post TikTok videos with their opposite-sex and gender variant/fluid classmates. As Iran's educational system has failed in its attempt to condition girls and women into accepting second-class citizenship, Iranian girls and women have risen to reclaim rights they once had before the Islamic Republic came to power. Virtual platforms have provided Iranian students, especially women, with vast amounts of

information unavailable in the country's schools and an open space for them to develop their specific form of cyberfeminism, though I caution *cyberfeminism* is not typically a term used by Iranian activists to describe their politics.¹ Generation Z has insight into alternative lives; how women and girls across the world live more freely, contrasting starkly with the heteropatriarchal society they experience in Iran. In repressive regimes, like the Islamic Republic, political and civil spheres are not permitted to exist. Individual actors use virtual locations, not necessarily or initially intended for this purpose, to convey the mood of the group (Golkar, 2015).

Strong Iranian Women Courageously Taking It to the Street

An important example of Iranian women's online activism emerged after and in part as a result of the *Green Movement*. Since 2009, the Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad has been living in self-imposed exile, from where she started the 2016 *White Wednesdays* and *My Stealthy Freedom* social media campaigns. The slogan on the *mystealthyfreedom* website is "The right for individual Iranian women to choose whether they want the hijab" (Alinejad, 2017). *My Stealthy*

¹ Worldwide, cyberfeminism arose in the 1990s as a response to the increasing convergence of gender, technology, and virtual communication. To avoid the animosity of male-dominated online spaces and to cooperatively create a discourse focused on respect, shared experience, and feminist values, many women established women-only forums like the SAPPHO list (Hall, 1996). Cyberfeminism includes both utopian and separatist feminist viewpoints. Liberal cyberfeminists, who draw inspiration from postmodern gender theory and Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto, see cyberspace as a possible utopia where physical symbols of race, gender, and sexuality can be removed to allow for fluid identities and sexual liberation (Hall, 1996). More recently, liberal cyberfeminism has focused on user-generated and interactive knowledge production, as with Mel Chen (2010), who uses case studies of what they refer to as "everywhere archives." Radical cyberfeminists, on the other hand, contest a romanticized view by emphasizing how online environments frequently mirror offline instances of gender-based discrimination and harassment. Expanding beyond early cyberfeminist optimism or later overriding pessimism, scholars like Ayu Saraswati highlight ongoing tensions in cyberfeminism and examine how digital spaces can both reinforce and disrupt systems of power, especially those that depend upon racism, misogyny, and neoliberal capitalism.

Saraswati (2021) explores the "neoliberal self(ie)" as a digital phenomenon in which feminist activism on platforms like Instagram is constrained by consumerism, visibility, and personal branding. Saraswati demonstrates how pain, which is frequently racialized, gendered, and generational, is turned into a valuable commodity on social media by using the example of Indian-Canadian "instapoet" Rupi Kaur. Kaur's poetry of phantasmagoria, or the aestheticization of suffering as a consumable digital spectacle, becomes entangled with feminist protest. In some ways, this digital activism is empowering, but it is also limited by the platforms it aims to instrumentalize, a limitation that turns feminist affect into commodified content rather than ongoing or enduring political resistance. In a related but distinct context, Chen (2010) uses the case studies of Asian FTM (female-to-male) trans YouTubers, specifically videos produced by Zach and Thomas Beatie. By emphasizing racialized spectacles and the politics of who is seen, remembered, or erased online, Chen's analysis challenges some cyberfeminist presumptions to remain a bit more hopeful. In addition to affirming complex visibility for marginalized trans masculine global existence, these digital spaces support counter-archival practices and community-building, which challenge prevailing narratives that are frequently cisnormative and racially charged. The temporary and personal archives of social media users provide a decentralized method of creating knowledge and identity, in contrast to the physically located state archives. Together, Saraswati (2021) and Chen (2010) highlight the conflicts between structural limitations and digital empowerment, prompting us to think about how racialized and gendered bodies are commodified, archived, and circulated in the digital era for multiple and often competing purposes.

Nonetheless, strictly cyberfeminist or not, school-aged girls and adults in Iran are using social media to educate themselves and raise their awareness on issues like women's liberation and reproductive justice. Despite commercial limitations, Internet access has created a new virtual platform for political opposition and new tools for resistance to effectively defy attempts by authoritarian governments to suppress protest by controlling and monitoring speech and other securitizing or policing activities (Rahimi, 2003). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, have aided dissident political movements to weaken the authoritarian regime in Iran, as evidenced by several instances in the recent history of the fight for democracy (Lamer, 1995).

Freedom urged Iranian women and young girls to upload pictures without their headscarves. Several schoolgirls actively participated (Figure 1) and in *White Wednesdays*, too (Figure 2).

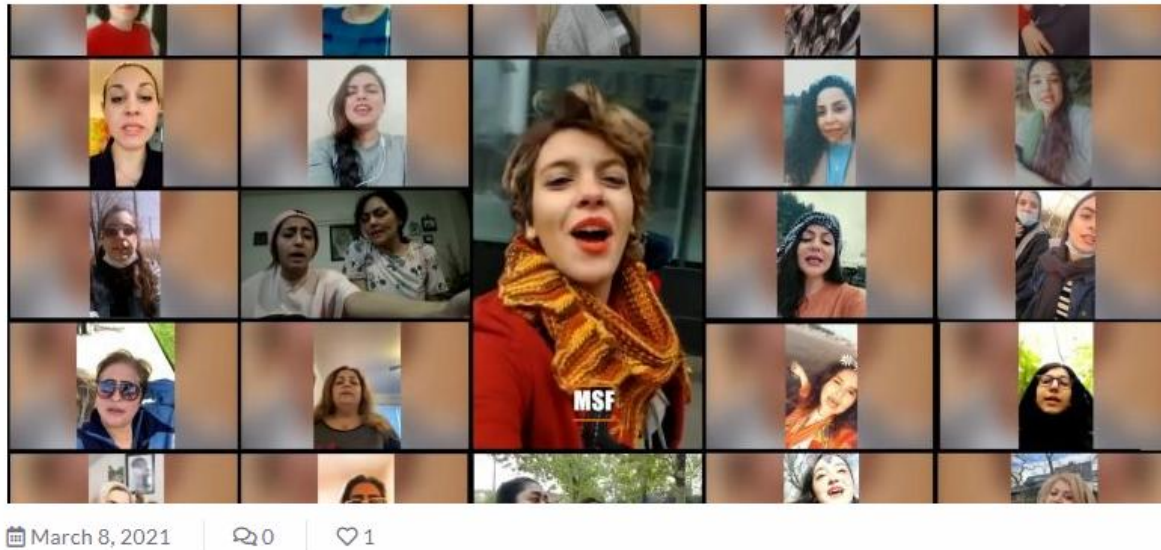


Figure 1. Collage of Iranian Women Singing in Solidarity on International Women’s Day, *My Stealthy Freedom*, Instagram video, March 8, 2021. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/a-message-from-prison-for-international-womensday/>



Figure 2. Iranian Woman Raises White Scarf on a Stick, symbolizing defiance of mandatory hijab laws. Masih Alinejad, “Woman Holding a White Scarf,” *White Wednesdays Campaign*, 2019. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/shaparak-shajarizadeh/>

The *My Stealthy Freedom* campaign acquired new momentum in 2017 as a result of the *White Wednesdays* action, which featured Iranian women posting photos and videos of themselves hanging white headscarves on a stick each Wednesday as a nonviolent protest against the hijab

law that requires women to completely cover their hair, leaving only the *circle of the face*. As per these government parameters for the hijab, all other clothes need to cover women completely and in no way cling to them or outline any *sexually suggestive* parts of their bodies (e.g., breasts). In solidarity with Iranian women's protests, men and women worldwide sent images and videos of themselves wearing loose white headscarves or waving the white scarves in the air. Fearless of the repercussions doled out by the morality police, which tracks the way women dress and detains and arrests women in violation of state-regulated dress codes. Many other Iranian women indicated support for these campaigns by driving around Tehran without the mandatory hijab, claiming that their cars were private spaces that allowed them to wear whatever they desired (Yaghoobi 2021). *White Wednesdays* persisted for longer than one year. Thus, it came as no surprise when, two years after *White Wednesdays* ended, female students and others again flocked to the streets (Figure 3) after the tragic 2022 death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police (Wright, 2022).



Figure 3. An Iranian Female Student Taking Her Mandatory Hijab Off and participating in the 2022 *Women, Life, Freedom* street protests. Medium Website, “The breadth of misogyny in Iran,” October 18, 2022. <https://medium.com/@iranvoice/the-breadth-of-misogyny-in-iran-77bd2dad67a3>

As has been understood by activists for generations and across geopolitical contexts, *street* in its physical manifestation is a hub for debating the issues at hand, a forum for expressing dissatisfaction, and a place where scattered efforts eventually coalesce, without prior organization or planning, into coordinated efforts to address specific problems (Bayat, 1997). Today, social media and the Internet allow users to create virtual groups that function as a *virtual political street* (Wolff, 2011). The internet poses a clear democratic threat to autocratic governments, such as the current regime in Iran, because it is a potent medium for contact that defies attempts at stringent regulation. The controlled educational system in Iran intentionally excludes accurate narratives of both Iranian and global history. Distortion of history serves to protect the authority of the Islamic Republic and its ideological goals. Historical teachings are curated to align with the regime's narrative, avoiding any acknowledgment of a time when

Iranian women could serve as judges, sing and dance freely, or live without the constant surveillance of the morality police. Despite the controlling efforts of the Islamic Republic, platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are becoming "archives of immediacy," revolutionizing how activism unfolds in real-time (Matter, 2021). Social media platforms not only document the ongoing struggles of Iranian women and students but also invite global audiences to actively engage with their stories. Generation Z's approach to digital archiving challenges traditional ideas of history by focusing on the raw, everyday experiences of resistance rather than the polished, controlled narratives customarily produced by authoritarian regimes. Rhetorical shift reflects feminist archival practices that value inclusivity and aim to disrupt dominant power structures (Matter, 2021).

Because an Iranian archive of immediacy exists, Iran's TikTok generation is far from unaware of alternative social structures. Through videos, pictures, and stories passed down by parents, grandparents, and other relatives, young people have access to truths schools try to obscure. To challenge the authority of the Iranian state, students have used online spaces to establish a new political space. Despite the Iranian government's restrictions on internet use, political dissidents have found innovative ways to contest governmental power, thanks to the internet's rapid expansion and constant change (Rahimi, 2003). Social media has given Iranian girls the opportunity to compare their current reality to footage and images from the era of the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), allowing them to compare the rights and freedoms women enjoyed during that time (See Figure 4 on the next page.), freedoms as fundamental as being able to decide what to wear, to access birth control freely, to work unfettered with men as colleagues, to serve as judges, and to be the petitioner in a divorce, (Ustiasvili, 2025). Historical insights have sparked a more profound understanding among female and male youth of how rights and justice have been taken from them and how many invisible fences restrict their life options. Awareness fuels resistance and shapes determination to fight for a freer and more equitable future.

Echoing strategies of movements in support of marginalized communities in a variety of contexts, such as the women who spearheaded *Black Lives Matter* in the US and the women who developed the Reproductive Justice framework, Iranian girls challenge the official narratives by creating *archives of resistance*. Through digital activism, Iranian girls of Generation Z are reshaping the very definition of archives, focusing on immediacy and accessibility. These young activists show how digital archives are not static collections but powerful, evolving tools for advocacy and solidarity as well as for building collective identities and driving action (Chen, 2010). Archives, including colonial archives that function as sites of struggles between the colonizing forces that create the archives and those among the colonized who use them, become more than just records of the past; they are deeply tied to the power dynamics of the present (Arondekar, 2005). Using social media to create and share archives with content that defies state censorship, Iranian girls assert their voices and humanity by co-creating living, dynamic archives where they share and preserve stories that the state-controlled education system and media often try to silence. But students are using cyberspace to decolonize the archives by reclaiming control over their narratives and asserting their human rights as well as their reproductive and familial choices. By amplifying voices that are otherwise marginalized, virtual archives challenge the erasures and distortions imposed by the Islamic Republic, creating a record of alternative histories focused on women's rights, activism, and capable service to the state..



Figure 4: Two of the 200 Iranian women who were pilots in Iran's Pahlavi Era. The photo is the cover page for *Zane Rooz* (*Today's Woman*) magazine of the time. Pinterest, "Beautiful Iran before Dark Islamic Revolution 1979." Shared by Sarah Irani S. May 28, 2025. <https://fr.pinterest.com/pin/104497653841830010/>

Repression, Dissent, Transformation

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 resulted in the fall of a secular government, giving rise to *modern* or, at least and more accurately, contemporary Iran. Forty-seven years later, young Iranians in the Islamic Republic reject what they experience as oppressive laws, isolation from the rest of the world, and harsh Western sanctions on their nation (Saber, 2022). Under the

current regime, problems extend beyond censorship: Students in Iran suffer from poverty and are subjected to bullying at school by the state. The morality police humiliate students publicly. The world devalues their nation and homeland because of its regressive and repressive government. Gen Z is also the first to have grown up surrounded by social media and the Internet, and so they understand there is a different world beyond Iran's borders. Unsurprisingly, young people, and in particular young women, seek change (Bahari, 2022). The Islamic Republic needs to bring meaningful changes to the educational system, changes that address the new generation's needs. The government is unlikely to effectuate these changes on its own. However, without these changes, the youth, and particularly young female students, will not stay silent. Social media has become a vital outlet for these students, offering a space to share their stories and rally support for their causes. Campaigns like *My Stealthy Freedom* and *White Wednesdays* illustrate how effectively students have leveraged these platforms to advocate for societal change and challenge systemic oppression. The present movements; *Women, Life, Freedom*, and *Lion & Sun Revolution 2026*, show that a more significant movement for democracy and civil society is developing, the student movement possibly being its most active subgroup. A major source of discontent for the women in this movement is the mandatory inclusion of religious teachings in school curriculum, which many view as a tool for ideological control rather than education. Within the scope of the current social movement, Iranian female students actively resist the gender norms imposed by the educational system, challenging with determination and creativity the barriers they face. They use social media to amplify their voices and push back against societal expectations, often expressing frustration with the strict gender roles and expectations enforced in schools. Their resistance takes various forms, such as defying dress codes or organizing protests.

The Iranian student movement has several structural advantages that could result in substantial political and cultural breakthroughs despite the crackdowns and oppression by the powers that be. Iran's 1.3 million students, spread among hundreds of schools, colleges, and universities, are the political influencers that make up the student movement. From a sociological perspective, it is possible to consider students in general as politically engaged and as a subgroup of the social category *intellectuals*. Students' shared ties to thought, science, and specific cultural goods serve to define them. Shared bonds are essential for young student activists who oppose the *status quo* (Farsoun & Mashayekhi, 2005). Intellectuals in general and students in particular are the carriers of what Alvin Gouldner (1985, p. 30-33) refers to as "the culture of critical discourse," a subculture of reason and critical judgment that makes it easier to challenge the *status quo* and traditional knowledge. The student movement in Iran is still experiencing metamorphosis. Leadership and the student body are becoming more mature and democratic in everyday interactions. The most valuable achievement of the recent student movement is its intimate relationship with the pro-civil rights movement in Iran's society. The resilience of Iranian female students in confronting and challenging oppressive systems is truly remarkable, given that they frequently face resistance, imprisonment, torture, and, in some cases, death. Continued efforts aimed at regime change highlight the critical role digital platforms play as tools for resistance and empowerment in sociopolitical movements. By pushing back against gender norms and using social media as a powerful tool, Iranians actively challenge the systemic inequalities upheld by the educational system. There is still much to explore to understand the intersection of education, gender, and activism in authoritarian regimes. As we look ahead, future studies of Iranian resistance could generatively delve into the lasting effects of digital activism and the potential for student movements to drive meaningful systemic change.

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