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From Students to Rebels: The Effect of Education on the Women's Movement in Iran

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Abstract

After Iranian women spent years fighting for the right to education, Iran is now home to highly educated and successful women who still struggle to exercise equal rights to men. The fight for equality has taken different shapes through the years and under different regimes.

The Women, Life, Freedom Movement that began in 2022 revealed a contradiction. For years, the Iranian government has used schools as a mechanism of control. Although the state is using education to censor, restrict, and control girls, schools are often the site where girls launch a critique of the society they are meant to be learning to obey and ultimately replicate.

This study uses qualitative interviews to collect stories and experiences of Iranian women who were educated in Iran, no longer live in Iran, and participated in some capacity in the Women, Life, Freedom movement. It aims to understand what the role of education is in shaping women's rights activists in Iran and in diaspora. This study found that schools are often the first site of restriction and control of Iranian girls by the government thus contributing to the desire for students to rebel against authoritarianism and gender inequality.

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To all the Iranian girls fighting for freedom. I'm with you.

II. Introduction

Iranian women, among women all around the world, fought for the right to education for decades. Today, most Iranian women have access to education, some going on to become doctors, lawyers, scientists, and engineers. In fact, the majority of Iranian university students today are women.¹ However, Iranian women are still not equal to Iranian men both in law and in practice.

The Women, Life, Freedom movement began in 2022 after Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman, was taken into custody by the Iranian “Morality Police” for not fully covering her hair with a hijab. Amini was soon after found in a coma, and subsequently died. Her death sparked outrage after two women journalists released photographs of Amini in the hospital and an interview with her family members. The two journalists were subsequently sentenced to jail time for leaking the story. Protesters vowed to make Amini’s death a symbol.

The movement first erupted at the Aychi cemetery in Saqqez, Iran where Amini was buried. Forty-days after Amini’s death, large crowds marched towards the Aychi cemetery chanting “Women, Life, Freedom.” In the following months, protestors in almost every city in Iran, and many cities across the world, demanded change with the slogan “Women, Life, Freedom.” Remarkably, the demonstrations quickly continued in middle and high schools in Iran. School-aged girls across the country began removing their headscarves in school and shouting “death to the dictator!”² The Iranian regime responded to the movement with violence. Protestors have been beaten, shot in the street, and executed in prison, but the government has not been able to dim the light of the movement both in and out of the country.

¹ Afary, Janet, et al. “Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran.” *Dissent*, December 2, 2022.

² Afary. “Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran.”

School is a mechanism for a state to shape its citizens. In the case of Iran, schools are one way the Iranian regime seeks to create obedient members of society that will follow their version of Islam. Iranian schools come with tremendous constraints and state regulation. These regulations include gender segregation and mandatory *manto*³ and *hijab* for girls.

Iranian women who go on to higher education continue to face challenges. Many Iranian universities have banned women from studying certain subjects. While attending university, male and female students risk expulsion for participating in activism. Young, educated men and women in Iran face difficulty finding a job in their desired field due to the economic crisis and risk losing jobs they do find for participating in political movements. Iranian women face additional obstacles because of conservative ideas about gender roles and the domestic duties that are typically associated with women.

Ultimately, even if an Iranian woman can graduate with an advanced degree and land a good job, she will still be treated as a second-class citizen due to unfair laws on divorce, child custody, inheritance, legal standing, and state-mandated dress code. All these factors contribute to the large number of educated Iranian women leaving Iran to live elsewhere.

a. Research Question and Significance

This research seeks to understand the contradictions present in Iranian women's lives today, specifically what securing the right to education has meant for Iranian women who live in a country ruled by an interpretation of Shia Islam that stipulates particular roles for women and men. For decades, Iranian women have had to exercise the long-fought-for right to education under a regime that often uses education as a way of censoring and controlling its citizens and advancing gender inequality. At the same time, recent movements in Iran have shown that

³ A *manto* is typically a long overcoat.

schools have become a place where even young girls can launch a critique of the society that they are meant to be learning to reproduce.

The ultimate question of this research is: what is the role of education in creating a formative space for feminist consciousness to develop?

b. Literature Review

The literature available today is very helpful in understanding the challenges faced by Iranian girls, the role of education in their lives, and past and current resistance strategies used by Iranian women to advocate for gender equality. The literature is lacking, however, in understanding the contradictions that this research seeks to analyze. This research seeks to fill the gap on how an educational system and a society that operates through censorship, coercion, and threats could actually contribute to the creation of a feminist rebellion.

Challenges and Barriers Faced by Iranian Girls

Systematic sexism in Iran is not an invention of the Islamic Republic and the fight for education is one of the longest standing campaigns of Iranian women's rights activists, going back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911. In 1918, the first public school for girls opened.⁴ Under Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled from 1925 to 1941, women's right to education continued to expand. In 1935, the first woman was admitted to Tehran University.⁵ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Reza Shah Pahlavi's son, became the Shah of Iran in 1941. In 1966, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi established a new state-run Women's Center where civil society groups worked on

⁴ Memarzadeh, Neeki. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution." *INTERNATIONAL LAW* 33 (2023).

⁵ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution."

issues such as unveiling, education, and family law reforms.⁶ By 1978, literacy rates and university enrollment for women had greatly increased.⁷

Reza Shah Pahlavi outlawed hijabs in 1936. While this act seemed progressive on its face, allowing for women who wanted to unveil to do so, it left other women trapped in their homes either because of their own conservative and traditional views or that of their husbands or fathers.⁷

Reza Shah's views on family laws were less favorable to women. Under the Shah, women were required to obtain the signature of a male family member for their first marriage.⁸ Men had an unqualified right to divorce, while women could only divorce on the grounds of: the husband's failure to provide maintenance, his insanity, his impotence, or his mistreatment of his wife.⁹ When it came to child custody, fathers legally had greater rights to their children than mothers.¹⁰ Gendered disparity also existed for inheritance where sons were entitled to a greater inheritance than daughters.¹¹ In 1967, the Family Protection Law was codified. The Family Protection Law expanded women's rights to divorce and child custody, and placed restrictions on polygamy.¹² These reforms occurring under authoritarian leadership and backed by the United States and the United Kingdom ultimately was damaging to the women's movement because women's rights became associated with western imperialism.¹⁴ After the revolution, the government focused on reinstating laws that were more in tune with a particular interpretation of

⁶ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution." ⁷ Shavarini, Mitra K. "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education." *International Review of Education* 51, no. 4 (July 2005): 329–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>.

⁷ Afary, Janet. "Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran."

⁸ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution."

⁹ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution."

¹⁰ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution."

¹¹ Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution."

¹² Memarzadeh. "New Perspectives on Iran: The Path to Progressive Family Law Before the Islamic Revolution." ¹⁴ Keddie, Nikki R.. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 17–33.

Islam and rejected western influence.¹³

After the Iranian revolution in 1979, women systematically lost some of the rights they had gained under the Shah. Khomeini legalized polygamy, and reverted laws related to marriage, divorce, and child custody back to being extremely favorable to men. The government outlawed women vocalists and banned women from studying certain subjects. Today, at age 9, girls are mandated to cover their hair with hijabs. For some girls, this mandate starts earlier as veiling is a mandatory part of their school uniform.

A qualitative study in 2020 interviewed young women about their social capital and overall wellbeing and found that many women create “multiple identities” as a way of navigating through the challenges of living with such strict social and cultural boundaries.¹⁴ The women discussed feeling like they were playing a character during a majority of their everyday lives, so much so that some women found that they were losing sight of their real personalities.¹⁵ Iranian women often have little autonomy over their own lives. Many women describe going from being under the control of their families, to escaping their families by marrying, only to be under the control of their husbands, all while their social activities and work prospects are limited by their society and government.¹⁶

The Role of Education

Education has many roles when it comes to shaping one’s life. As it relates to women, in general, education gives girls choices as it can give them increased skills and opportunities to

¹³ Keddie. “Iranian Women’s Status and Struggles Since 1979.” Pp. 22-23.

¹⁴ Salehi, Asiyeh, et al. “Young Iranian Women as Agents of Social Change: A Qualitative Study.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 79 (March 2020): 102341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102341>, p. 3.

¹⁵ Salehi. “Young Iranian women as agents of social change: A qualitative study.” P. 3.

¹⁶ Salehi. “Young Iranian women as agents of social change: A qualitative study.” P. 3.

work outside their homes. Education can also give girls tools to develop a voice and the power to make informed choices about their own lives and that affect the world around them. This effect can be seen through generations as educated women's daughters are more likely to be educated themselves.

A 2021 study found a three-dimensional role of education for women's empowerment: personal, relational, and social empowerment. Educated women have improved cognitive skills, are better able to make health-related decisions for themselves and their children, have increased self-confidence, and are encouraged to pursue jobs in male-dominated fields.¹⁷ Educated women are more likely to participate in public debate, express their views, and exchange information.¹⁸ Education improves a women's self-esteem and expectations about her future.¹⁹ Educated girls are more likely to marry later in life and go on to have healthier families.²⁰ Education also enables girls to not only know their rights, but develop the courage to demand that their rights be met.²¹ Educated mothers tend to have better relationships with their husbands and can successfully negotiate within their households.²² A lot of literature and research exists to support that generally "... individuals with a higher educational attainment consistently exhibit a greater propensity to participate in the full spectrum of political activities, from milder forms of engagement such as voting or discussing politics to more public forms of mobilization such as

¹⁷ Engida, Yilikal Muche. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women Empowerment." *Journal of Social Sciences* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 35. <https://doi.org/10.3844/jssp.2021.32.38>.

¹⁸ Engida. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women's Empowerment." P. 35.

¹⁹ Engida. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women's Empowerment." P. 35.

²⁰ Engida. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women's Empowerment." P. 35.

²¹ Engida. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women's Empowerment." P. 35.

²² Engida. "The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women's Empowerment." P. 35.

demonstrations.”²³ While all this remains true, it’s important to look at other factors that may counteract some of these benefits when education becomes primarily a tool for social control.²⁴

In Iran, over the last few decades, the percentage of women in schools, especially in higher education, has increased greatly. After the 1979 revolution, an unprecedented percentage of newly enrolled students in university were women.²⁵ In 2012, for example, 70% of engineering and science students in Iran were women.²⁶ In 2016, the literacy rate for girls went up to 84.2%.²⁷ However, with that increase in enrollment has come increased restrictions.

Outside of school, girls in Iran are mandated to cover their hair with a headscarf starting at age nine. In schools, that restriction begins much earlier. When an Iranian girl first starts school, typically around age six, she must wear a full school uniform that includes a headscarf even though outside of school she is too young for that mandate to apply. In primary and secondary schools, students are segregated by gender. In university, students are integrated in classrooms, but have gender-specific common areas. Some universities have banned certain majors for women. While the specific banned majors vary by school, the majority are related to engineering, social sciences, business, and political science.²⁸

In 2022, researchers collected data on textbooks in the Iranian educational system to see if the textbooks taught and emphasized gender stereotypes. What they found is that Iranian

²³ Campante, Filipe R, and Davin Chor. “Why Was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (May 1, 2012): 168. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.26.2.167>.

²⁴ Sobhy, Hania. “The Lived Social Contract in Schools: From Protection to the Production of Hegemony.” *World Development* 137 (January 2021): 104986. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104986>.

²⁵ Samch, Catherine Z. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women’s Rights Activism across Borders*. Decolonizing Feminisms. Seattle (Wash.): University of Washington press, 2019, p. 43.

²⁶ Afary, Janet. “From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women.” *Freedom of Thought Journal*, no. 11 (April 2022): 3. <https://doi.org/10.53895/RGZG7213>.

²⁷ Afary. “From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women.”

²⁸ Nuland, Victoria. “Iranian Women Excluded from Major Areas of University Study.” *U.S. Department of State Press Statement*, August 21, 2012.

textbooks teach female students to accept dominance and gender discrimination.²⁹ Primary school textbooks in Iran include a 75% depiction of men in images, with only 25% of women.³⁰ The women who are depicted are most often engaged in domestic duties or parenting, while the men are mostly depicted in relation to politics, science, sports, and religion.³¹ Iranian girls are taught by their educational system that their role is to be submissive, while a man's role is to be authoritative.³² There were similar findings when looking at characteristics attributed to women: women were connected to emotional tenderness, kindness, and weakness, while men were connected to hard work, diligence, and interest in acquiring knowledge.³³ Despite schools reinforcing gender norms, Iranian women have an active presence in every field of professional achievement.

Resistance Strategies

Despite living with these restrictions, some young Iranian women believe that they can be agents of social change. As Haideh Moghissi, an Iranian sociologist, said, “the Islamic regime has not opened the gates. Women are jumping over the fences.”³⁴

A 2020 study interviewed seventeen young women from Shiraz, Iran between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five and found that the women interviewed described seeing major changes to education and work opportunities for women, which they attribute to “... the internal power

²⁹ Hashemian, ShakibaSadat, et al. “A Critical Review on the Reproduction of Dominance and Gender Discrimination Relations in the Textbooks of Iran’s Educational System.” *International Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 2 (2022): 103-115.

³⁰ Hashemian. “A Critical Review on the Reproduction of Dominance and Gender Discrimination Relations in the Textbooks of Iran’s Educational System.” P. 110.

³¹ Hashemian. “A Critical Review on the Reproduction of Dominance and Gender Discrimination Relations in the Textbooks of Iran’s Educational System.” P. 110.

³² Hashemian. “A Critical Review on the Reproduction of Dominance and Gender Discrimination Relations in the Textbooks of Iran’s Educational System.” P. 110.

³³ Hashemian. “A Critical Review on the Reproduction of Dominance and Gender Discrimination Relations in the Textbooks of Iran’s Educational System.” P. 111.

³⁴ Moghissi, Haideh. *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women’s Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement*. Women’s Studies at York Series. Basingstoke, Hampshire London: Macmillan, 1996, p. 183.

and self-efficacy of women.”³⁵ The study found four main strategies for social change when interviewing young Iranian women: building digital freedom; generative a new style of dressing; creating leisure opportunities; and changing social and sexual relationships. In general, the study found that women were “... making small, but significant steps in different spheres of their lives to enhance their authority and power for change, contributing to sustainable social and cultural development and a cohesive society.”³⁶ The research presented below examines whether and how education has contributed to these social change strategies.

A 2023 study described how non-movement of women can be revolutionary. Nonmovement refers to daily, incremental acts of disobedience and resistance.³⁷ One of the biggest examples of this is how Iranian women have resisted state-dictated rules on how they should dress. While the regime wants Iranian women to wear loose, long, and dark overcoats and dark colored head scarves that cover all of their hair, some women wear tighter and shorter styles of overcoats, and colorful head scarves that cover less and less hair as time goes on.³⁸

There is a clear contradiction between emerging politics and political discourse surrounding the way Iranian women should dress and the way that we have seen Iranian women continue to push the boundaries following the start of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. As the Iranian regime continues to increase pressure for women to completely cover their hair and bodies, especially after the start of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, many women have begun walking the streets with no hair cover at all.

³⁵ Salehi. “Young Iranian women as agents of social change: A qualitative study.” P. 3.

³⁶ Salehi. “Young Iranian women as agents of social change: A qualitative study.” P. 5.

³⁷ Tohidi, Nayereh. “Iran in a Transformative Process by Woman, Life, Freedom.” *Freedom of Thought Journal*, no. 13 (June 2023): 45. <https://doi.org/10.53895/ftj1314>.

³⁸ Tohidi. “Iran in a Transformative Process by *Women, Life, Freedom*.” P. 45.

Young Iranian women today have the unique opportunity to be exposed to liberal democracies and open societies that are in direct contrast to the dictatorship that they experience daily because of their access to the internet. With the knowledge of how different their lives could be, and while living with so much constraint on their lives, Iranian women have spearheaded a movement with the hope of starting another revolution.

The Women's Movement So Far

The Iranian women's movement dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The fight for liberation has looked different throughout the years as each generation of Iranian women has navigated living in an unequal society.

Under Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941), there were times that the government took steps to become more modern and progressive. However, a deeper look at those actions reveals that they are clearly rooted in a desire for control. An example of this is the compulsory unveiling of 1936. While discussion about veiling in Iran is typically focused on the state forcing women to cover their hair, there was a period of time under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi beginning in 1936 where women were forced to unveil. While this was said to be an attempt to modernize, it was met with mass opposition after police began forcibly removing hijabs from any woman who chose to wear one in public.³⁹ The compulsory unveiling under Reza Shah Pahlavi is a good example of the state "liberating" women in a very Western sense, which may have the opposite effect on women who chose to veil for religious or modesty reasons.

After the 1979 revolution, laws about veiling, marriage, and family quickly changed. In the first few weeks after the revolution, Khomeini announced that the Family Protection Act of 1967 was repealed, that women could not be judges, and that women must wear a hijab in the

³⁹ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 13.

workplace.⁴⁰ In response, and with the hope of preventing Khomeini and other government officials from enforcing compulsory veiling laws, a large protest broke out on International Women's Day on March 8, 1979.⁴¹ The protest was met with a significant amount of resistance by counter-protesters.⁴² In June of 1980, Khomeini announced that women were required to wear hijab in all government offices.⁴³ Soon after, hijabs became mandatory in all public places and this mandate was strictly enforced.⁴⁴ In September of 1982, primary and secondary schools became segregated by gender.⁴⁵

After the revolution, literacy and school completion rates rose for women.⁴⁸ The female adult literacy rate tripled from 24% in 1976 to 81% in 2016.⁴⁶ Primary school completion rates for women increased from 36% in 1971 to 99% in 2017, and the percentage of women in higher education increased by almost twenty times from 3% in 1978 to 59% in 2018.⁴⁷ The percentage of women in the workforce also almost doubled from 11% in 1990 to 19% in 2020.⁴⁸ The female life expectancy rose from 58 years in 1979 to 77.7 years in 2018, and the female mortality rate decreased from 267 deaths per 1,000 adults in 1978 to 50 deaths in 2018.⁴⁹ Though the revolution led to positive changes for women in terms of access to education, literacy, jobs, and health, the regulation of women's bodies and lives still turned many women against the regime.

⁴⁰ Gheytonchi, Elham. "Appendix: Chronology of Events Regarding Women in Iran since the Revolution of 1979." *Social Research* 67, no. 2 (June 2000): 439.

⁴¹ Keddie. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." P. 22.

⁴² Keddie. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." Pp. 22-23.

⁴³ Gheytonchi. "Appendix: Chronology of Events Regarding Women in Iran since the Revolution of 1979."

⁴⁴ Gheytonchi. "Appendix: Chronology of Events Regarding Women in Iran since the Revolution of 1979."

⁴⁵ Gheytonchi. "Appendix: Chronology of Events Regarding Women in Iran since the Revolution of 1979."⁴⁸ Nada, Garrett. "Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran." *United States Institute of Peace*, December 9, 2020, The Iran Primer.

⁴⁶ Nada. "Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran."

⁴⁷ Nada. "Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran."

⁴⁸ Nada. "Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran."

⁴⁹ Nada. "Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran."

During the presidency of Mohammed Khatemi (1997-2005), Iran saw the formation of numerous non-governmental organizations aimed at addressing women's issues and some important reforms that gave women more access to public spaces and relaxed the enforcement of veiling laws.⁵⁰ In March of 2000, on International Women's Day, Tehran saw the first public rally for women's rights since the 1979 revolution.

In 2006, the One Million Signatures Campaign was created after the police's violent reaction to an otherwise peaceful protest.⁵¹ Campaigners, inside and outside Iran, went door to door to collect signatures of support for legal reform of laws that were discriminatory against women.⁵² The campaign used a "...grassroots, consensus-building, and nonviolent method..." and "...emphasized the indigenous and local character of their struggle; pushed the Islamic Republic of Iran to honor its commitments to rights, equality, and justice; and challenged the many violences carried out in the name of postcolonial, anti-imperialist statehood."⁵³ The legal reform that the campaign backed strategically used Sharia principles in an effort to prove that Sharia law and just family laws for women could coexist.⁵⁴ The bill ultimately failed, but women's rights activists were not deterred.

Days before the 2005 presidential election, that would lead to the victory of conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over two thousand women staged a peaceful sit-in at the University of Tehran to show their criticism of the constitution that imposes "Islamic criteria" on gender equality.⁵⁵ A similar sit-in was held a year later in front of a busy Tehran square called Haft-e Tir Square.⁵⁶ Both sit-ins advocated for equality in family laws. The campaign ultimately

⁵⁰ Keddie. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." P. 26.

⁵¹ Keddie. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." P. 29.

⁵² Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 27.

⁵³ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 28.

⁵⁴ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 32.

⁵⁵ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 32-33.

⁵⁶ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*. P. 33.

created a global community of Iranian women and activists and opened a dialogue between women about identity and nation.⁵⁷

In the 2010s, two women separately mobilized for the women's movement and their actions quickly generated a large internet presence. In 2014, a journalist living outside of Iran named Massih Alinejad launched a social media campaign called "My Stealthy Freedom."⁵⁸ Alinejad asked women to submit unveiled photographs of themselves for her campaign's Facebook page.⁵⁹ Once the Facebook page flooded with photographs, Alinejad launched the White Wednesdays movement where she asked women to walk the streets unveiled or wear white hijabs on Wednesdays.⁶⁰ Alinejad encouraged women to use the hashtag #MyCameraIsMyWeapon.⁶¹ Alinejad has become a very controversial figure due to her public alignment with the Trump administration and her calls for a U.S. war against Iran. She has been criticized for discrediting the women's movement by associating it with the Trump administration.⁶² She has also been criticized as a member of the diaspora for spreading a negative image of Iran in Western media.⁶³ On December 27, 2017, 31-year-old Vida Movahed became known as the "Girl of Enghelab [Revolution] Street." Movahed stood on top of a utility box on Enghelab Street, which is in Tehran, and silently protested veiling laws by waving her white hijab around in the air on a stick.⁶⁴ After she was detained, an image of her on the utility

⁵⁷ Sameh. *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders*.

⁵⁸ Afary. "From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women." P. 17.

⁵⁹ Afary. "From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women." P. 17.

⁶⁰ Tafakori, Sara. "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 1 (September 1, 2021): 49. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715649>.

⁶¹ Tafakori. "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns." P. 49.

⁶² Tafakori. "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns." P. 58.

⁶³ Tafakori. "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns." P. 47.

⁶⁴ Afary. "From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women." Pp. 17-18.

box circulated online with the hashtag #WhereIsShe?⁶⁵ In the weeks after, dozens of women were arrested for doing the same and became known on the internet as the “Girls of Enghelab Street.”⁶⁶ While both of these campaigns focused on the policing of women’s bodies by the government, the discourse surrounding them in Iranian social media was quite distinct. The authenticity of Alinejad’s campaigns was criticized for being “diasporan”, while the Girls of Enghelab Street was represented as an indigenous and therefore more genuine movement.⁷⁰

Most recently, the Women, Life, Freedom movement erupted in 2022. Since then, protests have taken place all over the world in support of the movement. The Iranian regime has continued to try to stifle activist’s voices. The government beats, arrests, and kills activists, bars newspapers from covering campaigns and demonstrations, shuts down online platforms, and continues passing discriminatory laws.⁶⁷

A United Nations International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran found that, during the Women, Life, Freedom movement, the Iranian government killed over 500 protestors, many of which were women and children, and arrested over 20,000 protestors.⁶⁸ By January of 2024, the courts in Iran had sentenced at least twenty-six people to death in relation to protests.⁶⁹

While many people have supported the movement by participating in protests and other demonstrations, many have done so by breaking rules related to veiling. On October 5, 2023, a report spread about a sixteen-year-old girl named Armita Geravand who was in a coma after an

⁶⁵ Tafakori. “Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women’s Campaigns.” P. 49.

⁶⁶ Afary. “From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women.” Pp. 17-18. ⁷⁰ Tafakori. “Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women’s Campaigns.” P. 48.

⁶⁷ Afary. “From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women.” P. 23.

⁶⁸ “Executions, Murder, Rape, Torture Used to Repress ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Protests Detailed in 500+ Page UN Report.” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, March 19, 2024.

⁶⁹ “Executions, Murder, Rape, Torture Used to Repress ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Protests Detailed in 500+ Page UN Report.” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*.

altercation with the “Morality Police.”⁷⁰ Geravand entered a subway car with her friends without wearing a headscarf.⁷¹ Witnesses from inside the subway car said that Geravand was seen arguing with the police about her hair showing and that an officer pushed her causing her to hit her head on a metal object.⁷² Video surveillance captured her entering the subway car and then her friends carrying her unconscious body out of the car.⁷³ Footage from inside of the subway car was not released by the government.⁷⁴ Geravand fell into a coma and died several weeks later as a result.⁷⁵ Geravand’s death sparked outrage because of its stark similarities to what happened to Mahsa Amini.

The same week as the assault on Geravand, Narges Mohammadi became the second Iranian woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷⁶ Mohammadi won the Prize for her activism for women’s rights in Iran.⁷⁷ Mohammadi has been imprisoned by the Iranian government several times since the 1990s for her critic of the government.⁷⁸ In total, she has been arrested thirteen times, convicted five times, and sentenced to a total of thirty-one years in prison and 154 lashes for acting against national security.⁷⁹ Mohammadi was being detained in the Evin Prison in Tajrish, Iran at the time of the announcement of the Prize and is still detained there today.⁸⁰

In 2003, Mohammadi joined and became vice-president of the Defenders of Human Rights Center which was founded by the only other Iranian woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize,

⁷⁰ Schuetze, Christopher F. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2023.

⁷¹ Schuetze. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.”

⁷² Schuetze. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.”

⁷³ Schuetze. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.”

⁷⁴ Schuetze. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.”

⁷⁵ Schuetze. “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse.”

⁷⁶ Wright, Robin. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.” *United States Institute of Peace*, October 6, 2023.

⁷⁷ Wright. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.”

⁷⁸ Wright. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.”

⁷⁹ Wright. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.”

⁸⁰ Wright. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.”

human rights activist and lawyer Shirin Ebadi.⁸¹ Ebadi won the Prize in 2003 for her activism for the rights of women and children in Iran.

Soon after the Women, Life, Freedom movement began, students in Iranian schools began protesting inside of the schools by chanting and taking off their veils in direct violation of the mandatory school dress code. Some of these protests were captured on video or photographed and then distributed online. A video circulated from a school in Karaj, Iran, where students are heard chanting: “If we don’t unite, they will kill us one by one.”⁸² Another video from Karaj showed girls forcing a school official off school grounds by throwing water bottles at him and shouting: “shame on you.”⁸³ In Shiraz, Iran, dozens of students blocked traffic on a main road waving their headscarves in the air and shouting: “death to the dictator.”⁸⁴ Another group of students took off their headscarves and took a photograph raising their middle fingers at a framed photograph of Khomeini in their classroom.⁸⁵ Demonstrations like these continued in schools all across the country. The Center for Human Rights in Iran estimated that at least 720 university students had been detained in the year following Amini’s death.⁸⁶

Despite being a such a large site for control of young Iranian girls, schools became a place where girls learned to demand better for themselves and continued to do so even after the government responded with violence to stop them. The educational system in Iran is a microcosm of Iranian society. Contradictions have been embedded in Iranian society since the revolution when Iran simultaneously saw an increase in access to education, employment, and better health outcomes for women and new regulations and forms of control over women.

⁸¹ Wright. “Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Nobel Peace Prize.”

⁸² Gritten, David. “Iran schoolgirls remove hijabs in protests against government.” *BBC News*, October 4, 2022.

⁸³ Gritten. “Iran schoolgirls remove hijabs in protests against government.”

⁸⁴ Gritten. “Iran schoolgirls remove hijabs in protests against government.”

⁸⁵ Gritten. “Iran schoolgirls remove hijabs in protests against government.”

⁸⁶ “Students Across Iran Say “No” to Forced Hijab.” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, June 19, 2023.

III. Methodology

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Iranian women, including their reflections on the type of education they received in Iran, their feelings about the state of the Iranian women's movement today, and how they feel their education impacted their views or their participation in the women's movement in present day. I sought to understand both the ways in which the Iranian government has used education as a tool to socialize and discipline its citizens according to the ideologies and interests of the state, and how that may have backfired and contributed to the resistance.

a. Participants

Participants in this study were selected based on the following criteria: women who (1) were educated in Iran, (2) no longer live in Iran, and (3) participated in some capacity in the recent Women, Life, Freedom movement.

All the women interviewed currently live in the United States. Some of the women have lived in other countries since leaving Iran, such as Germany, France, and Turkey. It was important to my research that I not limit the participants to a particular age group. The intergenerational nature of the participant pool allowed me to gather data about how different generations experienced being educated in Iran based on the government they were ruled by at the time.

While I was only able to interview Iranian women who currently live in the United States, all of the interviewees were educated in Iran. Some of the women completed their entire education in Iran and others continued their studies after leaving Iran. Nevertheless, the stories and experiences of these women were vital to this research as they were able to highlight the

barriers they faced as young girls being educated in Iran and how those barriers contributed to their feelings about the Iranian government and the women’s movement.

Table 3.1: Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Level of Education Attained in Iran	Level of Education Attained Anywhere	Year of Immigration to the U.S.
Leila	33	1990	Tehran, Iran	Graduate Degree	Graduate Degree	2020
Azadeh	53	1970	Tehran, Iran	Some Secondary School	Secondary School	1994
Bahar	54	1969	Tehran, Iran	Secondary School	Undergraduate Degree	1991
Daria	56	1968	Tehran, Iran	Secondary School	Undergraduate Degree	1985
Farah	68	1956	Tehran, Iran	Undergraduate Degree	Undergraduate Degree	2024
Maryam	76	1948	Abadan, Iran	Secondary School	Secondary School	1997

b. Recruitment

Snowball recruiting was used and was integral to my ability to conduct this research. Referrals from someone familiar increased likelihood that women would respond and be willing to participate. Generally, I found that the women contacted were all very interested in being a part of this study. The only concern voiced to me was that of anonymity because of some women’s fears of retaliation for participating in this study. All participants were assured that their anonymity would be prioritized.

c. Interview Strategy

Interviews were semi-structured and qualitative. Questions were open-ended in an effort to collect real stories and narratives in the interviewee’s own words. Interviews were mostly conducted in English. Some interviewees were more comfortable answering some questions in

Farsi depending on the complexity of their answers and the stories they wanted to share.

Interviews were conducted both in person and via video conference depending on the physical location of the women at the time of the interview. All interviews were completed between June 9, 2024 and August 8, 2024.

All interviews were conducted in a way that was intended to be comfortable and conversational. During the interviews, interviewees cried, laughed, and told stories about their lives. Almost every interview ended with the interviewee thanking me for doing this research. Every interviewee seemed to be hopeful for the future of women's rights in Iran.

IV. Findings and Analysis

The contradictory relationship between education and the rebellion in Iran is explained by the fact that schools are sites of restriction and control by the government. As such, schools contribute to the desire for students to rebel against authoritarianism and gender inequality. Of course, schools are not the only sites of control in Iran. Many girls also face levels of control by their parents and other family members that are unequal to the experiences of most boys. However, for many girls, school is their first conscious experience of being controlled by the state.

Going to school as a girl in Iran comes with significant restrictions on what you can wear, say, do, and study. This is true for primary and secondary school, as well as at the university level. Many of these restrictions are imposed on girls from the second they first step into a classroom. This leads to resentment and anger towards the schools and ultimately towards the government who regulates the schools. It can also trigger a fight or flight response in girls, leading many of them to either join the rebellion or leave Iran all together.

a. Societal expectations and barriers

The experiences and societal expectations that the women I interviewed faced depended mostly on their ages. There was agreement between all the women that generally they felt that their rights were not equal to those of men. There was a significant generational difference in the overall view the women had about their schooling, particularly their primary and secondary schooling.

The women who were educated in Iran before the 1979 revolution, Farah and Maryam, had many pleasant memories of their primary and secondary school years. In retrospect, both Farah and Maryam remember enjoying those years. Farah, who was educated in Tehran, continued to use the word “easy” when describing those years. Farah’s use of the word “easy” was in comparison to the hardships she has watched children, including her own three children, face in school since the revolution. She reflected on some of the differences and said, “in my day, school was easy. Studying was easy. Pre-revolution, it was completely different than it is now. They didn’t bother us about hijabs. Now, kids hate school and their teachers because of the restrictions.” Farah said the hardest part about schooling for her was that she was forced to study religion which, looking back, she said really wasn’t that bad compared to what kids today are experiencing. Maryam, who was educated in Abadan, Iran, had similar memories to Farah. She said, “because I went to school when the Shah was in power, school was great. We had language teachers, we played sports. We were allowed to do everything. It’s not like that now. We were free.” She reflected on the issues she has watched the rest of her family struggle with since she left Iran in the 1990s. She said, “now there is no freedom. They torture people every day. Even the men don’t have freedom. Everything is expensive, people can’t find jobs. They can’t survive like this.” Maryam and Farah’s experiences when it came to access to education was the minority

for Iranian girls at the time. Pre-revolution, illiteracy rates in Iran for girls was at almost 80% and less than 40% of girls completed primary school.⁸⁷ Post-revolution, access to education for girls increased, but so did the restrictions that came with that education.⁸⁸

The women who were educated in Iran either post-revolution or during the years in which the revolution occurred, Leila, Azadeh, Daria, and Bahar, described those years as being very hard. All four of the women were educated in Tehran and came from similar socio-economic backgrounds where access to education was not an issue. They all experienced restrictions and acts of control by the government in primary and secondary school. Starting in primary school, girls were mandated to wear a school uniform which included: a *maghne*⁸⁹, a long and loose dress, and pants underneath the dress. They were not allowed to wear make-up or paint their nails, and they generally were not allowed to talk to boys. Their schools were segregated by gender. All the women described being lined up in front of the school every morning and being checked by school officials to make sure they were adhering strictly to the rules. Many of the women stated that they were sent home or suspended at times for breaking the rules.

Leila, who was born in Tehran in 1990, eleven years after the revolution, was in an all girls school in primary and secondary school and then went on to a gender-integrated university in Iran. She said that in primary school she didn't really understand the restrictions, but in secondary school the restrictions felt a lot harder to live with:

Every day before school, a woman would check us and if we did anything wrong they would send us home for a few days. In high school, we weren't allowed to pluck our eyebrows or show even a few strands of hair at school. We couldn't go

⁸⁷ Tabatabai, Shima, et al. "Health Care and Medical Education to Promote Women's Health in Iran; Four Decades Efforts, Challenges and Recommendations." *Archives of Iranian Medicine* 23, no. 7 (July 1, 2020): 469–79. <https://doi.org/10.34172/aim.2020.44>.

⁸⁸ Tabatabai. "Health Care and Medical Education to Promote Women's Health in Iran; Four Decades Efforts, Challenges, and Recommendations."

⁸⁹ A *maghne* is an Iranian head covering that covers the head, forehead, chin, and chest.

where we wanted, wear what we wanted. The school was involved in everything – even really personal things in your life.

Every woman who was educated post-revolution described at least one experience of being sent home from school for breaking dress code rules. Many of the women experienced this kind of suspension repeatedly.

Some of the women described their childhoods and teenage years as very stressful. The women lived with constant fear and anxiety about breaking some rule that would get them in trouble. Bahar, who was a ten-year-old living in Tehran when the revolution began, said,

All the experiences I had in my childhood are surrounded by pressure and fear of the outside world. When I was growing up, the only safe place for a girl was inside of her home. The government put so much pressure on girls – we couldn't show our hair, wear makeup, speak to men, or even laugh too loudly. It was a very difficult time in my life. The only time I remember enjoying my childhood are times that I was inside of my house.

When she went outside, Bahar always wore baggy clothing and made sure all her hair was covered, but she watched a lot of her classmates get in trouble for not abiding by the rules as she did. Every day when she walked out of her school, she did so in fear that some small mistake would get her in trouble with the police. In fact, she did sometimes get in trouble for wearing nail polish to school.

In addition to the stresses that children already faced in school, these women dealt with the added stress of tremendous constraints and rules that only applied to female students. Many of the women missed a lot of school due to suspensions, which meant that they did not have equal access to education and missed key lessons.

At the university level, the stresses that young Iranians face grow even greater. For admission to an Iranian university, all students must take an entrance examination called the Konkour. The Konkour is held once a year and determines whether a student is admitted to

university, as well as which fields of study they can study and where. Some students spend all their years in high school preparing for the examination, which is known for being extremely difficult. Leila, Bahar, and Farah all took the Konkour exam several years apart. They all saw the examination as a huge barrier to getting a university education due to its difficulty.

Once in university, many rules for girls were like that in primary and secondary school. While the university itself and classrooms were integrated with both boys and girls, there was still gender segregation in common areas. Many restrictions on what girls could wear on their bodies also remained. This ultimately was a distraction to the girls' studies and added to the stress that university itself poses. Leila, who attended Azad University in Tehran and graduated in 2013, said, "The school would pay attention to our nail polish, what we wore, everything we did. Every part of life was stressful because of that."

Some women expressed frustration in watching boys their age, whether it be their brothers, friends, or strangers, have more freedom and opportunities than they did. Azadeh, Daria, and Bahar all have brothers and told stories of inequality they experienced in their family homes. Azadeh's brothers were allowed to play sports and go on trips with their friends. As the only daughter of the family, she wasn't allowed to do either. Azadeh's parents were much stricter with the rules they had for her. She said, "My parents were afraid to let me do anything like that because I was a girl." Daria also has brothers and had similar experiences growing up. Daria recalled one conversation with her father. Daria's parents wanted her to become a doctor. When she told her father that she wanted to do finance like he did, she was told that girls don't take after their fathers, boys do. While Daria recognized that most girls in her position in the 1970s and 1980s didn't grow up with parents who were supportive and encouraging about a venture as

difficult as becoming a doctor, this support was tempered by her family's desire to control her future based on her gender.

Bahar has two younger brothers. Even though Bahar was much older than her brothers, she lived under much stricter rules than they did. Bahar's brothers were allowed to get jobs as teenagers, but she was not. From her parents' perspective, there was a negative cultural perception of young girls who worked. As a young girl, she was expected to go to school and go straight home. She was not allowed to be out of the house after dark, while the same was not true for her brothers. Even in the winter, when the sun set around 4:00 p.m., she was expected home before dark. Otherwise, her parents feared that there would be gossip around town about her. She told a story about getting approached in high school to be in a movie production. When she went home to ask her parents, she was immediately shut down. Bahar thought it was a great opportunity, but her parents were worried about the gossip that would be created if others saw her face on a movie poster or advertisement.

Even though Bahar was taught traditional gender roles growing up, and her played a role in enforcing those gender roles, she always knew she wanted to work outside the home, and she credits that drive to her mother. From the time Bahar's mother was eighteen and Bahar was two her mother worked as a teacher. Day after day, she watched her mother get ready, go to work, and make her own money not because it was financially necessary but because that is what her mother wanted to do. She said, "I learned from her from as young as I can remember. She always stood on her own two feet. I wanted to do that too." Although Bahar got married at age twenty-two, and had her first child at age twenty-four, she has worked since she graduated from university and still works today thirty years later.

Many of the women expressed frustration that they were able to get certain degrees, but ultimately not able to get a job in their desired field. While there are other factors that contribute to the difficulty many people had in finding jobs, such as the economic crisis that Iran continues to face, many of the women felt that being a woman exacerbated those factors. Generally, there was a feeling that women were not wanted in certain industries and that women were at a far greater risk of losing a job after getting it. For example, Leila studied translation in university. After she graduated from university in 2013, she had such a hard time finding a job in her desired field, she ultimately gave up and found a job in insurance. “I wanted to finish my education so I could find a good job,” she said, “unfortunately, even if you finish school and do well, you might not be able to get a job.” Bahar was able to get a job in an English language school, but found the environment in the school to be extremely stressful. As a woman, she felt she had to be very careful of everything she did and what everyone at the office thought of her for fear of losing her job. She felt like everyone was looking for a reason that she didn’t belong there.

In general, the societal view was that men were the breadwinners and women were responsible for taking care of the home and family. Growing up, Azadeh thought that women could have a career if they wanted, but she knew the options for women were limited. She didn’t expect to have the freedom to choose what she wanted for her future the way that boys could:

Men are more accepted in society there than women. Like if a woman wants to become an engineer, she can’t become any type of engineer. They might let you become a doctor, but then they will do anything they can to make it hard for you. There is freedom here in the U.S., there was no freedom there.

The pursuit of becoming a doctor is, of course, difficult in any part of the world. Even in the United States, becoming a doctor is expensive, difficult, and access to the type of education needed depends on race, class, gender, and other factors. The rate of female doctors in Iran is

actually higher than in the United States where Azadeh now lives.⁹⁰ In 2020, Iranian women accounted for over 50% of doctors in Iran.⁹¹ Despite this and the fact that there is not actually freedom for all in the U.S., Azadeh feels free in comparison to the life she left in Iran where she experienced injustice and sexism every day.

This feeling was reflected by many of the other women as well. Leila shared that she felt that women were not taken as seriously as men in every aspect of life. She feels that everything in life is easier for men in Iran. Farah feels that women essentially have no rights in Iran. As an example, she noted that the government doesn't even give women equal rights to their own children.

Maryam remembered having different expectations for her future than other girls she grew up with. Maryam was born in 1948 in Abadan, Iran, so all of her childhood and a good portion of her adult life was lived before the revolution of 1979. Her parents thought that her education was important in that they wanted her to learn to read, write, and other basic skills, but they weren't concerned about her getting a higher level of education or pursuing a career. Other girls that Maryam grew up with spent a lot of their time talking about finding a husband and having children. Maryam didn't want those things, at least not yet. She wanted to become a teacher. Even though Maryam had no interest in getting married at the time, her now husband proposed marriage in front of her family when she was sixteen years old, and she knew she had to accept his proposal. She said, "at that age, I would have rather become a teacher than get married. I wasn't even thinking about looking for a husband. I wasn't ready to leave my family

⁹⁰ Boyle, Patrick, et al. "Women Are Changing the Face of Medicine in America." *Association of American Medical Colleges*, n.d.; Tabatabai. "Health Care and Medical Education to Promote Women's Health in Iran; Four Decades Efforts, Challenges and Recommendations."

⁹¹ Tabatabai. "Health Care and Medical Education to Promote Women's Health in Iran; Four Decades Efforts, Challenges and Recommendations."

yet.” Still, she got married while still in high school and moved to her husband’s hometown of Khorramabad, Iran shortly after graduating.

Azadeh was nine-years-old during the 1979 revolution, and she was taught traditional gender roles growing up by society, her family, and in school. However, when she got older and was exposed to people of different backgrounds and beliefs, her perspective started to shift. She said, “when I was younger, I was taught that men are supposed to be the provider and women are supposed to take care of the man, the house, and the family. That’s what I was taught. As I grew up, my expectations about what women could do changed.” Leila, who was born and educated in Iran after the revolution of 1979, said that she was always taught growing up that women were supposed to be in the house. Similar to Azadeh, as she met people from different backgrounds in her Tehran university and was introduced to social media, she said, “I learned that was wrong.”

Many of the women connected these restrictions to their reason for leaving Iran. Leila, for example, explained that being a young girl in Iran was very stressful for her. She constantly felt like she was being watched and that any wrong move, however small, could put her life in danger. Leila described one particular experience that she will never forget. One day, Leila was walking on the street with the last inch or so of her hair sticking out of the bottom of her hijab. A woman on the street walked up to her, grabbed her hair, and pulled on her hair with extreme force. Leila said, “after that, I knew I needed to leave Iran one day. I couldn’t live with that control forever.” While this event didn’t take place at Leila’s school or by a government official, it speaks to the general culture of Tehran in the early 2000s.

These restrictions not only caused stress for girls, but actually instilled fear in them. Leila lived with these strict rules on what she could do, say, and wear and watched others be brutalized for defying the government for years. She ultimately left Iran in 2018 when she was twenty-

seven years old, but she still feels fear towards the Iranian government, so much so that she is scared to return. She said, “I miss my family so much, but I am so scared to go back. I feel the fear in my bones.”

b. Education

“Education gives girls wings.”

- Daria

Every woman interviewed thought that education was crucial for girls. There were two main themes among their answers. First, that education gave girls more opportunities and second, that through education, girls learned what their rights were. Overall, I was able to observe a shift between the younger participants and the older participants in how much education was prioritized when they were school-aged. The older participants were raised with the idea that education was important for girls to a certain extent, in that their families wanted them to gain basic skills like reading and writing from school, but they generally had the expectation that they would marry young and start a family. The younger participants, who were primarily educated after the revolution and the expansion of universal education, were raised by parents who thought their education was very important regardless of whether they were going to marry. Azadeh said, “Growing up, I wanted to get the highest level of education I could. I thought – maybe I couldn’t become what I wanted to become, but at least I could get educated. Every woman in Iran wanted to be educated.” Regardless of their upbringings, all the women generally believed that all Iranian women today have a desire to be highly educated.

Many of the women felt that education was a gateway to self-determination and autonomy. The women identified the importance of a woman being able to stand on her own two feet. Leila thought that education was important to make sure girls were not bound to their

husbands and families. From a very young age, Leila knew that she wanted to move out of her family's home as soon as she could and start working. Leila always wanted to be financially independent. Daria said that education can make it so every girl, even those from small villages, can excel. She said, "Education and knowledge are power. It can expand your horizons. It can give girls self-determination." Bahar said that education is one of the most important things a girl can have so that she doesn't need to rely on anyone else. Without it, she said that many women are trapped in unhappy marriages because of finances.

Others added that it was important for girls to get an education so that they know their rights. Azadeh said that the more educated a girl is and the more she knows about her rights, the better she thinks they can guide themselves through life and make decisions about their lives. Daria thinks that education is a powerful tool of resistance. She wondered whether the Iranian government started to limit what women can study and the opportunities that they would have as a way to block women from using education as a way to escape their control.

Ultimately, regardless of their age, upbringing, and whether their education was prioritized by their parents, all of the women agreed that education is paramount for girls today. The women also agreed that most Iranian girls today want to be highly educated and that they either have, or plan to in the future, encourage their daughters to be educated.

c. Resistance strategies in Iran

"If they don't bring a chair for you, bring your own chair."

– Daria

Women described little acts of resistance or non-movement, as it is described in the literature, dating back to being in primary school.⁹² The acts ranged from something as small as

⁹² Tohidi. "Iran in a Transformative Process by *Women, Life, Freedom.*"

wearing nail polish to school to much more overt rebellious acts. While breaking the rules and acting rebellious as a child is not specific to Iranian children, the rules and restrictions that Iranian children face are unique.

Multiple women described small acts of resistance to the daily practice of being lined up in front of school for body checks, a morning ritual in which school staff would check that students were dressed in the required school uniforms and that students were not wearing anything that was prohibited. Azadeh wore jeans under her dress to school multiple times, when the school uniform mandated pants of a different and very specific fabric. When she did, school staff would rip the pants she was wearing and send her home, sometimes for as long as two weeks. Azadeh would wear makeup and nail polish to school, both of which were prohibited. When she did, she would be taken to the bathroom and forced to wipe the makeup from her face or to remove the nail polish. Her and her friends would talk to boys outside of the school building in the morning. All these little acts would lead to her suspension from school for a period of time.

Daria described similar small acts of resistance. She gave examples of having a cigarette outside of school and having a boyfriend. In order to side-step the rules against talking to boys, Daria would pretend that her male friends were her family members. She would learn the familytree of all her male friends so that if she was questioned by the police, she would have a believable claim that they were family. Daria told a story about her and her friends hiding stickers in their shoes that said, “marge bar Khomeini” [“death to Khomeini”]. After the daily body checks before school, they would take the stickers out of their shoes and stick them to the walls inside the school. She said, “It didn’t make a difference, but it sent a message. You can’t indoctrinate us.”

Since Maryam was thirty-one years old when the revolution happened, she didn't experience the same restrictions that some of the other women did. She did, however, struggle with the traditional gender roles of the conservative and religious views of the town she moved to after she got married at age sixteen. After moving to Khorramabad, she was encouraged to start wearing a head scarf and more conservative clothing even though at the time those things were not mandated by the government. She said, "They would ask me why I would go outside without covering up and I told them because I didn't want to." She was surrounded by people trying to force her into traditional domestic roles, but she wanted more for herself. At just sixteen years old in the 1960s, Maryam became the only wife in her conservative Khorramabad neighborhood to get her driver's license, she trained to become a teacher, and she never wore a hijab or any other conservative clothing.

Greater acts of resistance started at different ages for each woman. Similarly, what initiated the women's interest in political activism differed. Daria went to her first protest at age eleven when she accompanied her mother to a demonstration against compulsory hijab. She remembered the exact date: March 8, 1979. She said, "I knew at a very young age that it was important to resist. I thought, men aren't going to show up for us, we have to do it." People threw eggs and tomatoes at Daria and other demonstrators. Even at such a young age, Daria thought that women were going to be the ones who made a difference. For Daria, seeing the world through television and movies was one of her motivators. Once she saw how other people were living, she was driven to demand better for the Iranian people. She said, "From VHS tapes, we got a glimpse of other worlds."

Another motivator for Daria was seeing the experience her sister had after getting in trouble for going to a party in high school. She was arrested and spent five days in jail. After that,

Daria's sister had a hard time getting into university. Daria attributed that difficulty to her getting arrested in school. One of the determining factors for getting into university at the time was a grade for ethics. In Daria's sister's case, her arrest led to a low ethics grade and ultimately to her not being able to attend university, all for attending a high school party.

Farah's first protest was the same as Daria's, the March 8, 1979 protest against compulsory hijab after Khomeini took power. Though while Daria was eleven-years-old, Farah was twenty-three-years-old. She said, "I went outside with a bunch of other women without a hijab on. They hit us. I was out of work for a long time after that." This experience didn't deter Farah. She continued to attend protests and still does in support of Women, Life, Free

While school is often the first site of restriction and control for young Iranian girls, it is also often the first time that they begin to resist that control. Even with small acts like wearing nail polish to school or a different fabric of pants than the mandatory dress code requires, girls are showing the school that they will not blindly follow unjust rules even at a very young age.

d. Continuing Resistance in the Diaspora

Of all the women, Farah and Daria are the only ones who participated in traditional acts of activism, like protests, while inside Iran. Most of the women described being frightened to engage in any protests or organized activism in Iran. While Daria went to a protest with her mother when she was eleven years old, but it wasn't until after she left Iran that she took a big role in activism. For years after leaving Iran in 1985 at age seventeen, Daria felt disconnected from Iran. She felt she didn't belong there anymore. Once she had access to internet and email, the lines of communication with her loved ones in Iran opened and she started to get more involved in politics. She explained that one of her motivating factors was that, because she was eleven years old when the revolution began, she still had memories of what life was like before

the revolution when veiling was not mandatory and she was able to live with significantly less restrictions on what she could do or say as a woman.

One of Daria's goals is to educate others. She reflected on working on the One Million Signatures Campaign in California in 2006. Even during her work on the campaign, Daria did not think that their proposed bill to change ten gender discriminatory laws would get passed, but she used that campaign as a tool to educate others. She would talk to anyone who would listen about the rights that women were being deprived of and collected as many signatures from Iranians in diaspora? as she could. Since then, she has hosted and organized dozens of protests, rallies, and other events to spread awareness, raise money, and change legislation. When the Women, Life, Freedom movement started, it was natural for Daria to take a major role in mobilizing for the movement in California where she now lives. She said, "I learn from the activists inside of Iran. They have taught me the possibilities of what can and needs to be done." Daria is now an integral part of the mobilization for Iranian women's rights. She has also taken lead roles in other campaigns such as Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, and campaigning for politicians like Bernie Sanders. She has dedicated her life to advocacy. She said, "I have my own bullhorn!"

Azadeh began working for an organization in France as a pre-teen. The organization would organize protests and create literature to hand out to people on the street to educate them on what the revolution had meant for Iranian citizens. After moving to the U.S., she wasn't involved in political movements until the Women, Life, Freedom movement began. Since then, she has attended many protests in California where she now lives.

Leila, who left Iran at age thirty, went to a few scattered protests in Tehran when she was a teenager and young adult, but it wasn't until the Women, Life, Freedom movement that she

found herself repeatedly attending protests and becoming more involved. In Iran, she described being afraid to protest. She said, “When I was in school, we didn’t think to do what they are doing now. We didn’t have the courage. I was scared I would die if I resisted.” The Green Movement began in Iran after the 2009 election where incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared victory in what protesters claimed was a manipulated election. During the Green Movement, Leila heard stories about protestors being hit, shot at, and arrested, and she feared for her own life. She said, “It was like war.” In the U.S., she felt safer protesting. She went to as many protests as she could once Women, Life, Freedom protests started being held in California, where she now lives. Leila feels like the rest of the world isn’t standing up for Iranian women and this silence means she must speak up. She said, “It’s my duty. I feel the pain of the girls still in Iran in my soul. It feels good to stand up for them.”

Every woman got emotional when I brought up the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Farah immediately started to cry. She said that most women in Iran are against the current government and that the only reason there hasn’t been another revolution yet is because the government has weapons. “Women got stronger after Mahsa died,” she explained. “Especially mothers who want to protect their daughters.” Leila argued that the Women, Life, Freedom movement will eventually be transformative for Iranian women’s rights. She is in awe of the women who continue to rebel even after seeing so many people get hit, arrested, and killed for doing just that. She said, “Iranian women showed the world that when they want to do something, they will. They can overthrow the government.”

Azadeh said that things need to change for women in Iran. Women should be as free as men. She reflected that real Islam does not say that women must cover their hair and body. She said,

No where in the holy book does it say that women have to cover their hair and body. It's all in the men's heads. It's their problem if they see a woman's hair and they get aroused. It's not the women's problem. We should have the right to choose how to live our lives.

For Bahar and Maryam, Women, Life, Freedom was the first movement each of them ever joined. Bahar said she was never someone who got involved in political movements but with Women, Life, Freedom, it was different. She agrees with the message, and she thinks there needs to be a fundamental cultural overhaul in Iran. Maryam focused on how awe-inspiring she finds the protests inside of Iran to be. She got emotional discussing the strength and courage she has observed from younger generations in Iran. She said she doesn't understand how these kids, some as young as middle and high school, find the bravery to stand up to a government that they have repeatedly seen beat and kill others for doing the same.

Ultimately the relationship between education and the rebellion begins when a girl first steps foot in a school in Iran. From the very first day of school, girls are mandated to dress, speak, and act a certain way based on the government's interpretation of Shia Islam. All the women interviewed for this research who were educated in Iran after the 1979 revolution experienced these tremendous restrictions in school. They all eventually chose to resist the authoritarianism and gender inequality they experienced in Iran and leave Iran all together. Years later, all the women, including those who were born and educated years before the revolution, are still fighting for girls to be free from this state control.

e. **Looking to the Future**

“The future is female.”

- Daria

While the lived experiences of the women I interviewed varied, there is one thing they all unequivocally agreed on: women and girls will be the reason that the Iranian women’s movement progresses.

Included in every reflection about the future of the women’s movement in Iran was that Iranian women are strong. Daria called them “The Lioness Women of the Resistance.” Azadeh said that if anything is going to change in Iran, it will be women who do it. She said, “Iranian women are very strong. They can do anything.” Farah had similar thoughts. She said, “Women in Iran are stronger than 1000 men. We are still fighting and one day we will win.” Maryam thinks that Iranian women will win this fight because they won’t stop until they do. She said, “For two years, they have been killing people, hanging people, beating people. There is a fire in their bellies and it’s only going to get bigger and bigger. Now it’s global and the whole world knows what the government is doing to them.” These reflections were tied to the women’s shared experiences in surviving extreme restrictions both in schools and in public, getting an education despite the repressive conditions they lived in, and seeing themselves and so many women like them endure and thrive even while living in such an unequal society.

Leila, who is now thirty-three-years-old reflected on what she perceived to be differences between her generation when they were school-aged and the current generation, stating:

Girls today are so strong. My generation was scared. I was scared. The girls today have a bright future. It gives me goosebumps. My generation thought you had to either stay in Iran and take it or run away. Now you see such young girls know what they are owed. The Iranian government could get away with treating my generation like that, but they won’t get away with it with this generation.

Others attributed the spark of school protests to the fact that young Iranian girls think that what happened to Mahsa could happen to them too. Farah said, “The young kids in school today, they see themselves in Mahsa. So much so that they took their hijabs off and took to the streets to protest.” Daria said that young Iranian women have nothing to lose, but everything to gain. They don’t want to have a similar fate to Mahsa. And some thought it was connected to internet access. Daria said, “Internet is a big generational difference. Kids today get to see how people of their own generation are living outside of Iran. They want to live like other people. They say, why not us?” Maryam had a similar thought. She said, “Girls in Iran are watching the rest of the world have so much freedom and then their government take away their lives and their freedom. Their eyes have been opened to the rest of the world.”

Bahar agrees that Iranian women can start another revolution, but she thinks that the focus needs to shift not just to changing the government, but to changing Iranian culture. In Iran, she says, it’s not just the government putting pressure on girls, but also their families and society at large. She said, “Iranian culture for years and years has always seen women as weak. The women of the Women, Life, Freedom movement are showing everyone – we are smart, we are educated, we have careers, we are mothers. We don’t need men to give us strength.” Bahar thinks that we need to focus on educating men and teaching them that women are equal to them. Daria shared a unique sentiment about Iranian heritage. She said, “For years, Iranian women have hidden their heritage. With this movement, Iranian women have brought pride back to being Iranian because now we can say – we are the women of Women, Life, Freedom.” While the Women, Life, Freedom movement has been suppressed and laws have still not changed, Bahar has hope that there will at least be a lasting impact on Iranian culture.

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