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In what ways has the enforcement of hijab become a site for  
political resistance and dissent in Iran?

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## Introduction

This paper examines the impact of the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and the subsequent emergence of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF) movement in Iran. It explores how the enforcement of the hijab has become a focal point for political resistance and dissent. Specifically, this paper explores the transformation of the hijab in Iran, from a religious symbol to a politicised source of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic. It aims to contribute a gendered insight into the multifaceted nature of political protest in Iran, underscoring the emergence of women’s rights at the forefront of a nationwide protest.

Iran presents a compelling case study of women-led protests in Muslim-majority states, as the Islamic Republic has intervened legislatively in women’s dress “to an extent that no other Muslim country has yet to experience”.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, state control over women’s attire has been enforced through sweeping dress-code laws and the intrusive presence of the morality police in public spaces. Over four decades of unwavering regulation has transformed the hijab from a religious garment into a politicised tool of state legitimacy, making it a site of both compliance and resistance. Through the enforcement of a mandatory hijab, the status of Iranian women has been deeply politicised and incorporated into the core of the government’s agenda. Iranian women have been transformed into symbols through which the regime enforces its ideological control, a strategy evident in both pre – and post – revolutionary policies.

Furthermore, the scale and diversity of the movement following Mahsa Amini’s death

reveals the “intimate connection between the control and assault on the dignity of a women’s body, with the control and assault on the dignity of an entire nation”.<sup>2</sup> At 22-years-old, Mahsa Amini’s death “embodied the nation’s future” under theocratic rule, thus had a profound mobilizing effect on the nation.<sup>3</sup> Amini’s death, while a personal tragedy, sparked widespread protests that highlight deeper discontent with the Islamic Republic. Overall, the emergence of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in response to these policies underscores the intersection of gender and political dissent, offering a valuable insight into Iranian women’s ongoing struggle for gender equality and the broader dynamics of state control and civil resistance in Iran.

This paper argues that the 2022 WLF movement marks a new wave of feminist protest in Iran, driven by the pivotal role of young women and the rise of social media as a tool for political resistance. The movement, rooted in demands for women’s liberation, reflects a shift from previous protests like the 2009 Green Movement, with a growing sense of disillusionment towards reform within the Islamic Republic and increasing calls for regime change.

## Background

Following the collapse of the Western-backed Pahlavi monarchy in 1979, Shi’i cleric Ayatollah Khomeini rose to power, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the re – instalment of Sharia Law. Previous scholars note that the Islamic Revolution “erupted like a volcano”<sup>4</sup> due to the intense political and economic pressures that had accumulated over the Pahlavi period. Notably, the mandatory hijab was established in 1983, in order to represent a state departure from the pre –



revolution unveiling period. Article 102 of the Law of Islamic Punishments made it an offence for an Iranian woman to appear in public without mandatory hijab. Hijab is defined by contemporary Muslim experts as “the obligation of a Muslim woman to cover all parts of her body, apart from hands and face, in public and in the presence of unrelated men”.<sup>5</sup> While the hijab exists in various forms, this paper uses the term as an umbrella concept to refer to the state-imposed dress code, including the black chador. Highlighting the resilience of these policies, the hijab is still compulsory under Sharia Law in Iran today.

Despite its resilience, the mandatory hijab has become “the quintessential symbol of popular disconnect with the Islamic republic” in contemporary Iran.<sup>6</sup> Over the past two decades, there has been an increased visibility of women's political activism, and recent protests have amplified the need for a deeper examination of the structural causes behind such movements. While substantial scholarship exists on women's rights and movements in Iran, there remains limited academic focus on the specific role of young women in rising to the forefront of nationwide protests by 2022, demonstrating remarkable acts of defiance. While 2022 does not mark the emergence of a women's movement or the onset of feminist activism in Iran, it is crucial to understand why young women became the leading figures in this movement, symbolizing a broader societal push for the removal of the Islamic Republic, supported by both men and women. This shift in leadership and protest imagery necessitates in – depth exploration to comprehend the dynamics behind the WLF movement.

By exploring the feminist and revolutionary undertones of the 2022 protests, this research highlights the emergence of a new

feminist wave led by Iran's young women, who envision a future beyond the constraints of an authoritarian regime, as social media platforms confront Gen Z with the ideals of freedom and individuality. Finally, this paper finds the growing ideological gap between the Islamic Republic and Iran's young women at the center of this movement.

## Mahsa Amini: A Catalyst for Protest

Iran's mandatory hijab law marked a pivotal moment in 2022 after Mahsa Amini, a 22 year old Kurdish woman, died in the custody of Iran's morality police. The function of morality police in Islamic regimes is to enforce Islamic moral law and social behaviour, such as the wearing of state appropriate hijab in public places, in order to establish an ‘Islamic’ society.<sup>7</sup> From 2005, following the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the morality police's activities were increased and expanded greater control over social and moral activities. Amini's death thus sparked extensive debate and speculation surrounding the enforcement of hijab, not only within Iran, but around the world. At the time of her arrest, Amini was travelling from Kurdistan to Tehran to visit family and was arrested for not wearing the state appropriate hijab. Following this, she was taken into police custody for an alleged ‘re-education session’ on appropriate dress code.

While the authorities have claimed Amini suffered a heart attack at the time of her arrest, she was brought into hospital in a coma, and images of Amini unconscious with extensive bruising on her face, began to circulate rapidly.<sup>8</sup> Her death struck controversy among varying media outlets





and human rights organisations. Speaking on her death, UN experts in Geneva “strongly condemned the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini”,<sup>9</sup> stating “she is another victim of Iran’s sustained repression and systematic discrimination against women”<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, the UN called for an investigation into her death. Furthermore, Amnesty International, an NGO known for its advocacy on human rights, refers to eyewitnesses who claim that “Amini was violently beaten”<sup>11</sup> whilst being transferred to Vozara detention centre, in Tehran, alluding to police brutality at the time of her death.

Alternatively, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, delivered a speech on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2022, referring to Amini’s death as “a young girl who passed away”,<sup>12</sup> rather than acknowledging Amini as a victim of police brutality. This lack of acknowledgement reflects a broader trend of the regimes tendency to avoid responsibility for human rights breaches or address the grievances of Iranian citizens. Although Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi called for the Minister of Interior to follow up on the issue, and contacted the authorities,<sup>13</sup> according to Amnesty International, the investigation “does not meet the requirements of independence as it is due to be carried out by the Minister of Interior”,<sup>14</sup> making it an internal investigation, as opposed to an exterior one.

Overall, Mahsa Amini’s death in 2022 represents the long – standing repression and violence endured by women at the hands of the Islamic Republic since 1979. In many ways, WLF is rooted in the shared history of a “long historical process of struggle for gender equality”,<sup>15</sup> with Amini’s death sparking concerns over the future of women’s rights under the regime.

Thus, WLF represents a deep – rooted grievance rather than a contemporary problem.

## Woman, Life, Freedom

The 2022 WLF movement was met with international sympathy and supporting protests. Despite inciting demonstrations around the world, the protests were not met with fundamental change within the Iranian political system, nor compromise from the Islamic Republic. From September 2022, the world stage observed as Iranian’s confronted a core tenet of the Islamic Republic, the mandatory hijab.<sup>16</sup> Initially sparked by personal demands for women’s freedom, the protests evolved into a broader critique in opposition of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The nationwide protests continued for over 100 days<sup>17</sup>, although small demonstrations continue to pop up. The unrest began on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022, in Saez, Kurdistan during Amini’s funeral, and subsequently spread to major cities in Iran, including the capital Tehran. Notably, September 30<sup>th</sup> marks the most brutal day of the protests, with 66 casualties in Zahedan.<sup>18</sup> While an official death toll has not been released by authorities, Iran’s Human Rights News Agency (HRANA) states at least 530 protesters have been killed by security forces, and 20,000 protesters detained as of April 2023.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently, the death of a 22 – year – old woman reignited deep-rooted and long-standing dissent towards gender discrimination in Iran, following years of limited access to employment, limits on bodily autonomy, and political representation. With its feminist and revolutionary undertones, the protests in 2022 demonstrate what has been described as “a gradual cultural paradigm shift”,<sup>20</sup>



spanning over 44 years. Specifically, the role of women's rights as a catalyst for nationwide protest signifies a perceived shift in attitudes towards feminism and women's autonomy in Iran. Although demonstrating a shift in goals, demographics and leadership, 2022 still represents an episode in an "era of protests"<sup>21</sup> towards the Islamic republic since 2009, in which women have become the forefront and the energy. As argued by Monshipouri, "it is a high-intensity conflict with evolving, dynamic society that has nothing in common with the one that overturned the Pahlavi regime in 1979".<sup>22</sup>

## Young Women: A New Feminist Generation

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the WLF movement is the centrality of women's issues within the movement. While other factors are significant, such as deep-rooted socioeconomic grievances, WLF was a feminist movement at its forefront. Named by Moghadam as a "new feminist generation",<sup>23</sup> 2022 represents an evolution in activism surrounding gender roles and behaviour. This movement reflects young Iranian women's exploration of the "dialectical relationship between the 'constraining' and 'liberating' potentials of the veil".<sup>24</sup>

Feminism, as both an ideology and social movement, is defined in this paper as a movement aimed at deconstructing the "inequitable distribution of political, social, and economic power between the sexes".<sup>25</sup> Arguably the most symbolic evidence of WLF's feminist tones is the widespread imagery of women publicly removing their hijabs and cutting their hair. Defying the states violent enforcement of the hijab, Iranian women have been filmed "hacking off their hair" in public and "burning their

hijabs" in the street<sup>26</sup>. This symbolic action signifies their rejection of the state – imposed dress code. Here, Shirazi-Mahajan's theory "symbolic interaction"<sup>27</sup> offers a useful lens through which to understand these actions. Symbolic interaction argues that "objects themselves...acquire meanings, and the ways that people use and relate to the objects also become meaningful".<sup>28</sup> The hijab, as a state – imposed object, becomes a powerful symbol of resistance when publicly discarded, as women reclaim their agency in a "symbolic act of resisting such gender politics".<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, these images became a visual, widespread image of the movement and gathered attention across social media and news outlets worldwide.

As well as symbolic imagery, it can be argued that the goals of any political movement are best illustrated by their slogans.<sup>30</sup> I argue that the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' is clear in its goals for women's liberation. It stands in stark distinction from the slogans of Iran's previous mass-demonstration, the 2009 Green movement, where Iranians chanted "where is my vote?".<sup>31</sup> This shift in priority underscores the divergence of political activism in Iran in recent years, with women's issues now emerging as central mobilizers of protests. In many ways, WLF has a seemingly "non-ideological texture".<sup>32</sup> The movement did not call on a specific leader, or political ideology, as with 2009, but instead, emerged as a deep-rooted anger towards long-standing gender repression in Iran. Thus, instead of conforming to a specific political ideology, WLF embodies a more personal, feminist tone. With reference to Carol Hanisch, "the personal is political",<sup>33</sup> and the hijab, that once was a personal choice, has evolved into a political obligation. In this transformative context, the limitations of the mandatory hijab



represent a personal and emotive struggle for women in Iran, transcending any singular ideology or political candidate.

### The Role of Iran's Young Women

Generation Z (Gen Z), or Iranians born between 1997 and 2012, were at the forefront of the 2022 WLF protests. While this section focuses on the key role of young women, WLF was diverse in its demographics and transcended age, political status, race, and gender. Upon analysis, the age of protesters who participated in WLF is striking, with high-ranking personnel reporting “the average age of protesters arrested was a mere 15-years-old”.<sup>34</sup> Unlike their parents, and grandparents generations, who attempted to instigate change from within the system, as with the 2009 Green Movement, young Iranians in 2022 are demonstrating a newfound awareness and determination to challenge the established order.

Importantly, Gen Z represent a departure from the foundations of the regime, the Islamic Revolution. Unlike previous generations, who had experienced the revolution first hand, or lived through war time in Iran, that legitimized some of the regime's policy, Gen Z are not held to these connections. This observation suggests that Gen Z appears more pragmatic, than ideologically committed, unlike older generations. Therefore, the mandatory hijab causes wider political resistance amongst the youth, because there is a lack of ideological connotations to the hijab for them. Explaining this further, scholars have suggested that the Iranian youth have newfound identities separate from the traditional ideological cultures of their society. Despite the mandatory hijab's enduring symbolic significance, its

resilience by 2022 has been challenged by a “deep generational gap”<sup>35</sup> between the regime and Iran's Gen Z, who increasingly reject repressive policies and assert personal freedoms. Indeed, there is a perceived tension between the regimes attempts to construct “a hegemonic identity” for young people,<sup>36</sup> and the increasingly resistant youth, who are identifying beyond the borders of the Islamic Republic. While Ayatollah Khomeini stated, “there is not a single topic in human life for which Islam has not provided instruction and established norms”<sup>37</sup> it can be argued that 2022 is a culmination of the youths “exhaustion with the Islamic Republic”<sup>38</sup> and its attempt to implement a state – identity. Overall, Iran's deep generational divide thus plays a huge role in shaping the trajectory of political change in Iran.

Particularly striking is the role of young women in WLF, who became the energy of a new wave of protest in Iran. Chants such as “clerics get lost”<sup>39</sup> were chanted by girls as young as 11 in Iranian classrooms, representing a departure from clerical rule. Similarly, a multitude of imagery circulates social media and news platforms, displaying young girls ripping down pictures of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei from classroom walls, as well as school girls pictured ‘holding their middle finger up’ to images of Iran's supreme leader.<sup>40</sup> In particular, in October 2022, a video emerged online of a group of teenage girls in the streets of Tehran “stopping traffic, ripping up photos of Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, and chanting ‘death to the dictator’”.<sup>41</sup>

The role of young women in 2022 is consistent with the evidence presented by the World Values Survey 2020 (Wave 7), which demonstrates young Iranian women as a politically active category. The survey



documents young women's willingness to protest, with 47% of female respondents indicating that 'they might join peaceful demonstrations'. Remarkably, this was the highest percentage of any age group and was also a higher percentage than men in any age group.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, 2022 has often been cited as a 'breakthrough' for Iranian women, or an 'unusual' occurrence in protests. While it marks a remarkable escalation in scale, and approaches to activism, Muslim women's history of political activism has frequently been overlooked, often replaced by narratives of victim – hood. Lila Abu – Lughod suggests that through Western culture, "Muslim women became connected to a mission to rescue them from their cultures",<sup>43</sup> depicted as passive victims. Here, an Islamic feminist lens is useful, with a heightened ability to analyse the complex relationship between feminism and Islam. Islamic feminism adequately highlights the agency of Muslim women in the feminist movement, by seeking empowerment and gender equality within an Islamic framework, by – passing discourses of victimhood. This serves in "breaking down the old hostile divide between secular and religious thought".<sup>44</sup> Through this, it creates a space for women's liberation within Islam and Iran.

Despite Westernised interpretations, Iranian women have consistently engaged in significant political movements, including the International Women's Day protests in 1979, the Green Movement in 2009, and the 'Girls of Revolution Street' protest in 2017, to name a few. Notably, the 'One Million Signatures Campaign', launched in 2006 sought to challenge discriminatory laws after Iran's failure to ratify the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women' (CEDAW).<sup>45</sup> Thus, despite facing major

gender discrimination in Iran, "Iranian women are constantly resisting and pressing for changes",<sup>46</sup> and are not by-standers to political protest.

### Online Feminist Activism

The role of social media platforms in the WLF movement suggests "a new phase in feminist strategic action",<sup>47</sup> one that bypasses the regime's typical repression tactics, and inter-connects women with feminist rhetoric domestically, and internationally. The 'virtual world' creates a new pocket for female agency, absent of the restrictions of real life in Iran. Gheytaichi and Moghadam have argued that the extensive rise of the use of 'information and communication technologies' (ICT's)<sup>48</sup> in political protest, allows women to promote feminist ideas, without the physical limitations. Through this, the hijab grew to be a site of political resistance both offline and online by 2022, contributing to its size and escalation.

The over-arching explanation for online activism in 2022, lies in the regime's authoritarian nature. Unlike in democracies, the use of social media works to facilitate occurring protests under authoritarian regimes. In democracies, information was already accessible, but in authoritarian regimes, the internet has significantly expanded access to information, despite attempts to control internet usage. Evidencing this, Ruijgrok's research finds that "internet use increases the expected number of protests in authoritarian states as hypothesized".<sup>49</sup> Thus, the relationship between social media and feminist protest has its roots in the regime's authoritarian nature.

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, X, and TikTok, have emerged as powerful





tools, for sharing information and creating global connections, which allows the youth to “bear witness to the world beyond Iran”<sup>50</sup>, in particular, the waves of global feminism. In the same stretch, social media has allowed young Iranians to visualise the democratic systems of the West, that stand in stark contrast to the limitations under the Islamic Republic. With this access to global ideas and various ways of identifying, Gen Z have increasingly begun to identify as individuals, challenging the regimes efforts to promote a state identity. Through this, Gen Z can be described as “an internet generation no longer dependent on state influenced television for their information”,<sup>51</sup> but instead, a generation expanding its identity beyond the Islamic Republic, within a highly interconnected, digital world.

A prominent example is the case of 16-year-old vlogger, Sarina Esmazadeh. She stated in a video posted to her YouTube channel “we’re not like the previous generation 20 years ago who didn’t know what life was like outside of Iran”,<sup>52</sup> she compares her lifestyle as a young person in Iran to those in New York and Los Angeles. Subsequent exposure to other lifestyles has arguably empowered a new generation to fight for a liberated future. Tragically, Sarina went to join protests and subsequently died after being “severely beaten in the head with batons”.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, during the WLF movement, young girls had come to social media app ‘TikTok’, to share grievances against the regime, and mobilize support. The 22 year-old Tik-Toker Hadis Najafi recorded a video on the way to a protest stating, “I hope in a few years when I look back, I will be happy that everything has changed for the better”<sup>54</sup>. Hadis’ family told BBC Persian she was shot dead just an hour later. These harrowing incidents underscore the risks associated with the pursuit of

political change for the Iranian youth, and the ‘loop-holes’ that online activism provides.

## Hijab: A Political Symbol and The Call for Regime Change

Recent scholarly arguments have alluded to a “witnessed shift of protest aims in Iran, from reform to revolution”.<sup>55</sup> I argue that this shift peaked in 2022, with calls for regime change louder than ever. Resistance against the hijab represents a broader demand for regime change, with the mandatory hijab being symbolic of the Islamic Republic. Given the resilience of hijab enforcement since 1983, overturning such legislation necessitates the establishment of a new government, as the current regime has exhibited no inclination towards reform in 40 years. Namely, the calls for regime change were not rooted in dissent towards the hijab itself, but towards the governments enforcement of such. As Koo observes, many urban Iranian women accept the hijab as a religious symbol but resist its imposition as a means of religious discipline.<sup>56</sup> This resistance aligns with Islamic feminist critiques, which challenges one of the key tenants of the Islamic Republic, the “deference to the rulership of the supreme jurisprudent, or the *velayat-e faghih*”.<sup>57</sup> Velayat – e faghih refers to the justification of the rule of clergy over the state, or the top – down Islamisation of the state.

Evidencing WLF’s revolutionary tones, the movement saw widespread use of slogans such as “this is no longer a protest, but a start of a revolution”.<sup>58</sup> Compared with previous anti-regime protests, WLF represents an entirely different message. At its core is an extensive disillusionment with



the existing regime, reflecting a loss of faith for reform under the Islamic republic. Supporting this, ‘The Group for Analysing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran’ (GAMAAN) conducted a survey during December 2022, on Iranian’s attitudes toward the 2022 protests, and the current regime. In response to the question “Islamic Republic: Yes or No?”, 81% of the respondents inside Iran responded “no”, 15% responded “yes”, and 4% were not sure.<sup>59</sup> The GAMAAN survey underscores a notable shift in Iranian attitude towards the government and its policies, compared to previous movement’s such as the 2009 Green Movement, which primarily advocated for reform and democratization. Furthermore, contrasting with previous GAMAAN surveys, post-2022 “the percentage of those who support regime change increased by 20%”.<sup>60</sup> While few see a chance for reform within the current regime, an overwhelming number of Iranians seek an alternative for their government. This divergence suggests a dwindling confidence among Iranians in the regime’s ability to reform, particularly on hijab policy. Therefore, WLF can be seen as a representation of “people’s disappointment in the possibility of reform in any of the cultural, economic, or centralized areas of governance pursued by the Islamic Republic”.<sup>61</sup>

## The Response of the Islamic Republic

This section will discuss the strict crackdown of the Islamic Republic following the 2022 protests. The section demonstrates that the Iranian government’s response to the WLF movement bears no signs of cooperation. Instead, it has led to a

continued escalation of crackdowns, and the implementation of stricter security measures, aimed at quelling the opposition. Crackdown from the Islamic Republic will be categorised and discussed in two sub-sections, (1) violent suppression tactics, (2) legislative tactics.

### Violent Repression and Suppression Tactics

Reports and statistics of violence employed by the regime is mainly limited to NGO reports, based on first – hand witness accounts, as well as international news reports. Exact statistics cannot be confirmed as the Iranian government has not issued an official report. Despite limited sources, Human Rights Watch reported that the Iranian security forces employed violent weaponry, including shotguns, assault rifles, and handguns, to suppress 2022 demonstrators.<sup>62</sup> In response, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres has called on Iranian security forces to stop employing “unnecessary or disproportionate force”,<sup>63</sup> against a largely peaceful movement. In specific instances, Iranian security forces reportedly “opened fire on demonstrators in the town of Zahedan”,<sup>64</sup> resulting in many fatalities, and injuring dozens. A report conducted by Norway-based organisation, Iran Human Rights, reported 537 protesters killed by Iranian security forces. Similarly, the US based, Human Rights Activists News Agency estimated more than 19,400 protestors were arrested.<sup>65</sup>

At the heights of brutality, the Iranian government has tortured and executed three protesters, Majid Kazemi, Saleh Mirhashemi and Saeed Yaghoubi, following their arrests in November 2022 for their participation in the WLF movement. The three men were sentenced to death, according to Amnesty International, on the



charge of “enmity against God” (*moharebeh*),<sup>66</sup> based on torture induced confessions. Executions for protesting against the mandatory hijab underscore the extremes of deterrence tactics of the Islamic Republic.

Highlighting this, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei has named protesters as ‘opponents of the revolution’, stating “those who ignited unrest to sabotage the Islamic Republic deserve harsh prosecution and punishment”.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, the employment of violence as well as executions were utilised to “send a strong message to the world and the people of Iran that they will stop at nothing to crush and punish dissent”.<sup>68</sup>

Overall, severe, and violent crackdown from the Iranian regime contributes to dissent towards the mandatory hijab, and serves to associate it with violence, repression and a lack of freedom under the Islamic Republic.

Finally, following the death of Amini, and subsequent demonstrations, another young girl, 16-year-old girl Armita Geravand, was allegedly subjected to police brutality by the morality police for not wearing hijab in public. The Iranian girl was alleged to have been beaten by the police and consequently, collapsed on Tehran metro. She died 28 days later in hospital.<sup>69</sup> While Geravand was said to have died after suffering brain damage, a medical team from Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross investigated her death, noting that “the Islamic Republic of Iran has attempted to distort the narrative surrounding governments involvement in her death”.<sup>70</sup> This case closely reflects the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 at the hands of the morality police, drawing many parallels. Overall, further “state-sponsored

murders”<sup>71</sup> following the WLF protests highlight the Islamic Republic’s reluctance for compromise and demonstrates their use of deterrence to re-gain control. However, in a digital age where social media can mobilize activism and spread awareness of state violence, these murders, in many ways, have only served to intensify dissent towards the Islamic Republic and its violent implementation of the mandatory hijab policy.

### Legislative Response

Harsher penalties for non-compliance with hijab regulations were imposed just days after the one-year-anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s death. In April 2023, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated that “removing hijab is forbidden religiously and politically”,<sup>72</sup> and Iran’s morality police began to resume ‘headscarf’ patrols after a 10month pause in the same year. Notably, the Iranian parliament passed the “hijab and chastity”<sup>73</sup> bill in September 2023, re-instating the framework for the country’s mandatory dress code, defining specific parameters for attire and introducing harsher penalties, including fines and potential imprisonment of up to 10 years. Additionally, the hijab and chastity bill of 2023 imposes obligations on various governmental and law enforcement bodies to enforce compliance, as well as harsher penalties, expanding spaces under state surveillance. Significantly, the bill has come under severe scrutiny by UN officials, labelled as “promoting gender apartheid”.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, recent evidence suggests that the Islamic Republic has restricted digital freedoms and employed digital recognition technologies. The year 2022 has caused the regime to “mobilize two decades worth of investment, development, and planning on



information and internet controls”,<sup>75</sup> in order to limit online communication and limit access to information. This response can be attributed to the mobilizing effect social media and digital communications had on the WLF movement’s reach. At the beginning of protests, the regime added the most popular applications in Iran, Instagram and WhatsApp, to the list of censored platforms, as well as blocking the Google store.

Significantly, more than 90% of Iranians use Google’s Android phones, to access the internet<sup>76</sup>. In addition, A UN fact finding mission in 2023, refers to reports of “facial recognition technologies to identify and arrest women failing to comply with forced veiling and to identify protestors”.<sup>77</sup> Following this trend, the regime also introduced a mobile application, called ‘Nazer’ in 2020 that continues to be used post-2022. The platform is designed to allow SMS reporting of women seen without hijab in urban areas, where citizens can collaborate with the government to report license plates and other personal information of women, and often results in the vehicle registered being impounded.

Within digital restrictions, it can be argued that restrictions happened simultaneously with bouts of state violence. Feldstein highlights the correlation observed between severe internet disruptions and instances of regime brutality, finding that “cities with the harshest internet shutdowns have also suffered extreme forms of brutality from authorities”.<sup>78</sup> This trend was identified in Iranian cities including Zahedan, Sanandaj, and Saqqez. The most prominent example of this observed correlation is the Bloody Friday massacre of September 30<sup>th</sup> in the city of Zahedan, where at least 100 protesters were killed. The demonstrations

were “accompanied by severe internet disruptions”.<sup>79</sup> This evidence suggests that, when protesters fight for women’s autonomy, they are responded with unaccountable bouts of violence and limitations on freedom, not compromise. Moreover, whilst 2022 mark a turning point in activism surrounding women’s rights, it does not mark a turning point in government response nor policy.

## Conclusion

The paper has examined the ways in which the enforcement of hijab has become a site for political resistance and dissent in Iran. Mahsa Amini’s death, following her arrest for wearing ‘improper’ hijab, triggered a nationwide political protest in Iran. While her death acted as a catalyst, it did not mark the emergence of widespread dissent towards the Islamic Republic. Instead, it amplified deep-rooted grievances that have existed for over 40 years, with the protests taking on an increasingly revolutionary and feminist character.

A key finding of this research is that young women played a central role as political mobilisers in the WLF movement, highlighting the emergence of a new feminist generation in Iran. The analysis of the 2022 movement reveals a marked shift in activism related to women’s rights, with young women revealed as the driving force behind this transformation. The rise of online feminist activism, particularly through social media platforms such as TikTok, X, and Instagram, has played a crucial role in amplifying the voices of young Iranian women. These findings demonstrate a clear link between digital activism and a new, uncompromising, wave of feminism, marked by the younger





generation's desire for personal freedoms beyond the state-imposed hijab.

Overall, the complex interplay between state-enforced hijab laws and the values of Gen-Z, which increasingly prioritises individuality and freedom, has become a key driver of resistance. Social media has facilitated the dissemination of global feminist ideals, shaping a globally aware generation of Iranian women, who are not only rejecting the mandatory hijab but also directly challenging the regimes ideological and political authority. Unlike previous movements, this wave of activism is defined by its digital reach and transnational awareness, allowing young Iranians to integrate local grievances with broader feminist discourses.

Secondly, this study has discussed the hijabs evolution from a religious symbol to a political emblem of the Islamic Republic, analysing its symbolic significance in the WLF movement. Over time, the hijab has transcended its initial religious and personal connotations to become a key symbol of state control under the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the act of removing the hijab in public has emerged as a key form of resistance throughout WLF. More widely, this paper finds that since 1979, the hijab has functioned as a 'battleground' for broader socio-political grievances, reflecting the ongoing tension between state-imposed control and individual freedoms.

Ultimately, the WLF movement, marked by widespread calls for regime change, represents a significant shift from reformist demands in previous anti – regime movements. Unlike previous protests, such as the 2009 Green Movement, WLF conveyed a profound disillusionment with the regime. For many protestors, the resistance to the hijab extends beyond

opposition to religious dress, reflecting a broader rejection of the regime's

authoritarian rule and its top-down imposition of Islamisation.

Finally, the government's repression and suppression tactics confirms two things about hijab resistance in Iran. Firstly, that the uncompromising nature of the Islamic Republic over hijab enforcement led to calls for regime change in 2022 and explains the frustrations of the protesters. Secondly, that cyber restrictions imposed by the regime indicate how important social media and digital communications was to the mobilisation and size of protests in 2022.



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