

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2023

Gender Perspective

Mapping Gender: Putting Iran and Its ‘Burning’ Hijabs in Perspective¹



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The anti-hijab protests across the streets of the Islamic Republic of Iran have been making headlines for months now. The protests spread like a wildfire when on 16 September a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, succumbed to her injuries, allegedly caused due to custodial assault, for donning her hijab ‘inappropriately’. The protesting women are burning their hijabs and chopping their hair off. The protests, claiming hundreds of lives so far in Iran, are against the country’s morality police- infamous for their hideous religious impositions. Though reports indicate that the Iranian morality police has been disbanded, the situation still lacks clarity. Morality police, though ignited the fire, the regime’s repressive measures go beyond it and should be looked at holistically. While women’s resistance against the notorious *hijab* laws has been thriving for over 40 years since the Islamic revolution of 1979, it is only now that it gathered momentum due to the incessant media attention.

Hijab, in this regard, cannot simply be understood as an article of cloth. Mired in contentious political discourses associated with Islam, it has been a persistent source of political controversies. While *hijab* means ‘segregation’, its symbolic values, associated with an idea of modesty as well as the identity, are of paramount importance. In short, despite being a form of bodily coverage, it creates a political spectacle around Muslim women and their identities. Such is also the case in Iran where at this point anti-veiling sentiments are looming large against the Iranian government under the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi.

If we are to look at this conflict scenario from a gendered perspective, we need to unfold two caveats surrounding it. Firstly, it is essential to understand the Iranian historical context

¹ This commentary first appeared in the 150th Special Issue of Conflict Weekly, published by the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) on 17 november 2022. For this TSSP issue, recent developments have been incorporated to make it more relevant.

behind the *hijab*; Secondly, the bearing of this context on women's rights in Iran as well as in different settings debating on women's choice and agency needs to be explored; An analysis of what it entails for the larger conceptual question on gender may be a worth concluding point.

Understanding the Iranian Context

The genesis of the political contention over the *hijab* in Iran dates back to 1936. The *Kashf-e hijab* (unveiling) edict of 1936 banned all forms of Iranian veiling practices. The Reza Shah regime's Western-influenced decree coerced women to either abandon the *hijab* or stay away from public view.

In the mid-1930s, in spite of the imposed measures, only four thousand Iranian women (mostly from Tehran), hailing largely from the Western-educated upper class, foreigners and middle-class religious minorities, ventured into public domains unveiled (Abrahamian 2008: 84). This move, therefore alienated rural as well as middle- and lower-class women. The secularist high-handedness of the Shah regime was commented upon by one of the British diplomats by saying "There is nothing to take the place of religious influence, save an artificial nationalism which might well die with the Shah, leaving anarchy behind" (British Legation 1935; Cited in Abrahamian 2008: 95). While the next regime of Reza Pahlavi saw a dilution in the obligatory nature of the diktat, veiled women continued to be discriminated against and their upward social mobility was hindered significantly due to the prejudiced connotations attached to all forms of veils (El Guindi 1999: 174-175). This atmosphere of forced unveiling prevailed until the polar opposite diktats were issued under the new Islamic Republic of Iran post-1979 revolution. From forced unveiling to forced veiling- with the 1979 Islamic Revolution Iran walked from one extreme to another- this time reifying Islamic veiling vigorously.

The resistance against the Shah regime in the 1970s was built upon a redefined construction of women's modesty. Under the leadership of eminent sociologist Dr. Ali Shariati, modesty was now being redefined emulating the spirit of the Prophet's daughter Fatima's legacy. A sartorial combination of *manteau* (a long jacket) and *rusari* (headscarf) brought back a functional sense of modesty, alongside the traditional Iranian *chadors* (cloaks). The veil was now assigned a resistive meaning as ripples of veiled women were seen on the streets opposing the Shah regime. Even the women who are not the regular wearers of the veil, came on the streets veiled in solidarity with those who chose to veil. But once the Revolution took place in 1979 and the Shah regime was toppled by a new regime established by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the 1980s, the Islamic Republic declared a diktat of forced veiling under the pretext of 'moral cleansing'. Article 638 of the Book Five (the only permanent part of the Penal Code) of Iran's Islamic Penal Code passed in 1996, reads as follows:

Anyone in public places and roads who openly commits a *harām* (sinful) act, in addition to the punishment provided for the act, shall be sentenced to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes; and if they commit an act that is not punishable but violates public prudency, they shall only be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes (Government of Islamic Republic of Iran 1996).

It will not be presumptuous to say that the measures of repression remained unchanged for both forced unveiling and veiling. Only the morality police (formally known as Guidance Patrol/*Ghast-e-Ershad*) of the Islamic regime soon took the place of the Shah regime's secret police (formally known as SAVAK). In short, the Iranian women's fate was taken from the fire to the frying pan in the hands of the repressive state regimes- no matter Westernised or Islamic. In short, the androcentric state regimes, irrespective of their so-called modern or religious tilt, decide to tell women what to wear and in turn, control their bodies.

Iran, *Hijab* and the Contemporary Times

Over the last five years, there have been several sporadic movements stemming from disenchanted people. The Iranian 'forced veiling' measures were also vehemently resisted, especially at the behest of the social media exfoliation post-2010. An Iranian Facebook page named *My Stealthy Freedom* featuring photographs of bare-headed women spearheaded the online White Wednesday movement where women post online materials of them wearing anything white on Wednesdays to show their opposition to compulsory veiling in May 2017 (Persio 2017). The same year in December, expressing her solidarity with the movement Vida Movahed (31), *The Girl of Enghelab Street*, posted a video where she was shown removing her white headscarf and waving it while placing it on a stick for an hour on Tehran's Enghelab Street and was consequently, arrested for her act, resulting into social media uproar worldwide (Gerretsen 2018).

Having said that, the amount of media attention that the *hijab* protests garnered in Iran at this point is unparalleled. It is both due to the contentious nature of the attire associated with Islam and the negative perception that the country's cleric authority receives for being at loggerheads with the West. As much as it feeds into a Western essentialisation of drawing an equivalence between embracing the *hijab* and backwardness, it fans the global discourses on Islamophobia. Overall, in Iran, no substantial regime change may be envisioned simply banking on these protests- precisely because the country's coercive measures are known to be notorious for quelling people's resistance. Yet, Iran and its women are the rays of hope inspiring generations of women fighting for their rights across the world.

Impact on Women's Rights

The operative here, 'inappropriate', is known for dictating women's lives. Thus, talking of women's rights with the *hijab* as the bone of contention echoes different implications in different settings. For instance, its narrative pans out differently in a Muslim majority Islamic Republic of Iran or Saudi Arabia for that matter, compared to a Muslim minority France or India. Women's rights vis-à-vis bodily practices like the *hijab* are complex and multi-layered and therefore, seek to be understood from varied historical, and socio-political perspectives.

We may say that the *hijab* per se may not be having fixated negative implications, as the conventional media tends to suggest. Rather, the Iranian context runs parallel with the *hijab* controversy in France or in India. Pertaining to the *hijab*, these are comparable yet contrasting contexts. In France, the controversies may be traced back to 2004 when the country disallowed 'conspicuous religious symbols' in schools and in 2010 when the country joined the European face-veil banning spree under the pretext of its secularism debate (Amer 2015).

In India, the debate has been raging since the beginning of 2022 when educational institutions in Karnataka restricted *hijab*-clad Muslim students from attending educational institutions. While in Iran women are oppressed because of forced *hijab*, in France and India, the idea of *hijab* is closely entangled with the idea of 'other'. In France, the 'other' is painted in the image of an immigrant Arab. In India, it is the image of a Muslim 'other' shown in the light of the country's communal history and minority politics.

On a whole, irrespective of the locale or the issue, it is the repugnant peril of controlling women's bodies that remains at the heart of the rights discourse- it is indeed a basic right to live with dignity and self-respect. And an infringement of that forms the basic premise of patriarchy.

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