



# Soapboxes and Stealth on Revolution Street: Revisiting the Question of ‘Freedom’ in Iran’s Hijab Protests

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## Abstract

In this article, I examine how the concept of ‘freedom’ is articulated and deployed in narratives of anti-compulsory hijab protests in Iran. I posit that women’s rights movements in Iran become legible and, thereby, visible to US audiences when they conform to narrow frames of feminist activism and orientalist tropes. I begin this paper by analyzing the relationship between the “Girls of Revolution Street” (GRS) protests in Iran and the US-based “My Stealthy Freedom” (MSF) online movement to elucidate a politics of recognition that I argue reinforces orientalist representations of women’s rights in Iran. Through its circulation of GRS protest footage to its one million plus followers, MSF increased the visibility of resistance to mandatory hijab in Iran. Yet, through MSF’s selection of *which* GRS protests to publicize and commentary on *why* this movement is important, other critical aspects of the GRS protests were rendered invisible. I posit that the strategic framing of women’s rights through campaigns like MSF does more to attract international support than address the multi-faceted nature of gender injustice in Iran and, paradoxically, rests on Iranian women reproducing themselves as the vulnerable ‘unfree’ other.

## Keywords

Iran, Hijab, women’s rights, freedom, social justice movements, online activism

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## Introduction

“This is a civil-disobedience movement. Women know what the laws of the land say about hijab, and, based on that, they chose to protest.”

- Nasrin Sotoudeh, human rights lawyer

ما تمام نمی شویم ، هر روز تکثیر می شویم

("We won't end, we multiply every day.")

- Azam Jangravi, Girls of Revolution Street protester

On December 26, 2017, 31-year old Vida Movahedi climbed atop a utility box<sup>1</sup> located on Enghelab (Revolution) Street, one of Tehran's busiest streets. She wore jeans and a sweater instead of the requisite outer garment (e.g. *manteau*) that women in Iran must wear in public space. She also removed the white scarf from her head, a criminal offense since 1983 under Iran's Islamic Penal code.<sup>2</sup> Tying her scarf to a stick, she silently waved it like a flag from her elevated platform for almost an hour, while passersby took pictures and posted her image on social media.<sup>3</sup>

Following the protest, Movahedi was detained for nearly a month, prompting a national social media campaign to pressure Iranian authorities to release her. As Movahedi's identity had not been released to the public, she was instead referred to as the 'girl from Revolution Street,' with concerned Iranians tweeting *#دختر خیابان انقلاب کجاست* ("Where is the Girl from Revolution Street?") and the English-language hashtag *#Where\_Is\_She*. Movahedi was released on bail in late January 2018, only to be arrested several months later following a second demonstration. On October 23, 2018, Movahedi again waved her veil from a stick with an armful of balloons, while standing on top of a dome<sup>4</sup> in Enghelab (Revolution) Square, one of Tehran's largest roundabouts.<sup>5</sup> Movahedi was subsequently sentenced to one year in prison on charges of "encouraging corruption and prostitution to the public" for unveiling in public space.<sup>6</sup>

The places where Movahedi chose to stage her protests are significant. Following the 1979 Revolution, public spaces were renamed to reflect the dramatic shift from Iran's long history of monarchical rule to the newly established Islamic Republic. Accordingly, it is common for towns and cities throughout Iran to have streets and squares named after the Revolution. Movahedi held demonstrations in places that function as nationalistic symbols for the Islamic Republic, and her protest against compulsory hijab on Enghelab Street and Enghelab Square draws attention to the unprecedented rollback of women's socio-political rights following the Revolution. In the early days of the Islamic

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-hijab-islamic-dress-women-protests-girl-from-enghelab-street/29007848.html>

<sup>2</sup> Article 638 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code includes penalties for women who refuse to wear hijab in public, which range from fines to imprisonment.

<sup>3</sup> Esfandiari, Golnaz. 2018. "Uncovered 'Girl from Revolution Street' Picks up Steam in Iran." *Radio Free Europe*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-hijab-islamic-dress-women-protests-girl-from-enghelab-street/29007848.html> (accessed on December 11, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/azijangravi/status/1056903664252739586>

<sup>5</sup> Jangravi, Azam. Twitter post, October 29, 2018, 7:40 am, <https://twitter.com/azijangravi/status/1056903664252739586>.

<sup>6</sup> Vida Movahedi received a pardon from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and was released on May 26, 2019 after serving eight months in Gharchak Prison. Iranian state media attributed Movahedi's pardon to her refusal to conduct interviews with foreign media outlets. For more information on her case, please visit <https://iranhumanrights.org/>.

Republic, a number of regulations were passed that required women to cover in public spaces, with steep penalties for not observing proper hijab. Mirroring state narratives that the Revolution ushered in a new era of civil rights and equality, the imposition of mandatory hijab through the 1983 Veiling Act was framed through the language of women's emancipation (Naghibi 1999, 567). By provoking authorities to arrest and detain her, Movahedi's solitary protests challenged state narratives that hijab is necessary for women's safety and protection. Her public unveiling was a stark illustration of the violence of state-imposed compulsory hijab, which is enforced through fines, detention, and, in some cases, corporeal punishment.

Movahedi's initial protest was undoubtedly influenced by the popular social media campaign #WhiteWednesdays, which was launched through the Facebook page آزادی یواشکی زنان در ایران, also referred to as "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF). The MSF Facebook site was created in 2014 by Iranian journalist and activist Masih Alinejad and serves as a virtual space where women can post photos of themselves 'secretly' removing their veils. The website has since evolved into a transnational movement against mandatory hijab in Iran. The #WhiteWednesdays campaign began in May 2017 as part of the MSF online movement and women are encouraged to post photos of themselves wearing white scarves as a sign of protest against compulsory hijab. Footage with the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays are uploaded or reposted to MSF, often with pithy English-language translations or commentary from Alinejad that allows US audiences to follow developments in the campaign.

Several months after the #WhiteWednesdays online campaign commenced, Vida Movahedi removed her white scarf on a Wednesday in December 2017. Following Movahedi's lead, several other protests were held in rapid succession throughout Iran, with more than thirty women protesters arrested in early 2018. Collectively, these protesters are known as the "Girls of Revolution Street" (GRS).

The 2017-2018 GRS protests were held during a period of heightened political tension in Iran with protesters deeply aware of the steep consequences they would face for their civil disobedience, including police brutality, solitary confinement, and long prison sentences. Even more remarkable, the GRS protests spread beyond Iran's capital to more conservative provinces, including Isfahan, where women have been subjected to acid attacks for wearing 'bad hijab.'<sup>7</sup> Despite the formidable risks, the vast majority of the GRS women protested alone. This solitary mode of activism is quite unusual, not only because of gender dynamics, but also given Iran's long history of mass protests predicated on strength in numbers. It is also notable that, taken together, these solitary protests constituted a collective act of civil disobedience.

Images from these protests are striking, showing the solitary figures of women standing on elevated platforms with only a scarf on a stick, dwarfed by the onlooking crowds. The sharp contrast between the lone protesters and the crowds below simultaneously convey incredible bravery and immense precarity. The GRS protests sparked national debates about Iranian women's socio-political rights unprecedented since the Iranian Revolution, which provoked public clashes between various factions of the Iranian government.<sup>8</sup> The protests also attracted global attention, including from Trump

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<sup>7</sup> In 2014, there were a spate of acid attacks against women in Isfahan, with perpetrators shouting comments about hijab while attacking women. See the Center for Human Rights in Iran's report on acid attacks: <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/10/one-year-after-acid-attacks/>

<sup>8</sup> Findings from a 2014 survey conducted by Iran's Ministry of Culture and a 2014 report from the Center for Strategic Studies (a policy think tank associated with the Iranian President's office) found that nearly half of Iran's population opposes compulsory hijab (Center for Strategic Studies 2014). President Rouhani publicly released the three-year-old report in February 2018, at the height of the GRS protests. Rouhani was elected as president on a platform of social reform and his implicit support for expanding women's rights was read as a public split between the Rouhani presidency and hardline

administration officials who opportunistically used these protests to support their calls for regime change in Iran (Moaveni 2018).<sup>9</sup>

In the following sections, I examine representations of the 2017-2018 anti-compulsory hijab protests in Iran. First, I analyze the relationship between “My Stealthy Freedom” and the “Girls of Revolution Street” protests to elucidate a politics of recognition that I argue reinforces orientalist representations of women’s rights in Iran. Through its circulation of protest footage to its one million plus followers, MSF increased the visibility of the GRS protests and international media coverage of the arrests of GRS protesters. Yet, through MSF’s selection of which GRS protests to publicize and English-language commentary on why this movement is important, other critical aspects of the GRS protests were rendered invisible. I then discuss how the largely reductive framing of hijab as the antithesis to ‘freedom’ on the MSF Facebook page is largely devoid of any socio-political or historical context of feminist movements in Iran, thus leaving US audiences with an oversimplified and, in some cases, erroneous understanding of gender injustice in Iran. I am, therefore, particularly attentive to the role of MSF in *translating* the meaning and significance of these protests to US audiences, especially in light of criticisms within Iran that the MSF Facebook site often reinforces dominant Western discourses of the oppressed Iranian woman. I conclude that this results in the erasure of the immense complexity underlying debates about compulsory hijab and, more broadly, women’s rights in Iran. I posit that the strategic framing of women’s rights through campaigns like MSF does more to attract international support than address the multi-faceted nature of gender injustice in Iran and, paradoxically, rests on Iranian women reproducing themselves as the vulnerable ‘unfree’ other.

### Agency, Freedom, and Hijab in Iran

This article integrates postcolonial feminist and feminist geographic scholarship to examine how narrow conceptualizations of freedom render invisible important aspects of feminist activism in Iran. Taken together, these sets of literatures provide an expanded understanding of political agency to counter broad generalizations about the absence of freedom for women in Muslim-majority countries. These literatures also explicate how feminist movements in places like Iran are embedded within colonial histories and contemporary geopolitical dynamics that reproduce the limited visibility of certain forms of activism.

Much has been written on the history and politics of the hijab in the Middle East (see, for instance, Mernissi 1987; Ahmed 1992, 2011; El Saadawi 1997), veiling as a speech act (Mahmood 2005), the various meanings of the veil in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran (Moghadam 2002; Najmabadi 2005; Naghibi 2007; Moallem 2009, 2015), and veiling as an embodied socio-spatial practice (Secor 2002; Gökarıksel 2009, 2012, 2020; Fluri 2011; Bagheri 2014, 2019; Fluri and Lehr 2017). The symbolism and uses of the veil and its contested history are not, however, the focus of this article. Rather, I am interested

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government officials, including Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The Center for Strategic Studies report is available here: <http://www.css.ir/Media/PDF/1396/11/14/636532375414083535.pdf>. Iran’s Ministry of Culture also conducted a survey of public support for compulsory hijab and found that 21% of respondents across the country agree with mandatory hijab:

<https://www.ricac.ac.ir/plan/20/%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%B4%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88-%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%B4%C2%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%28%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85%29>

<sup>9</sup> Several high level Trump administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, have repeatedly called for regime change in Iran and have used violations of women’s rights to justify punitive actions (e.g. economic sanctions) against Iran.

in popular representations of protests against compulsory hijab in Iran, especially around questions of freedom, agency, and gender injustice.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has long problematized how liberal notions of freedom in Western scholarship on Muslim-majority countries can obscure how women exercise agency in their daily lives. In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood provides an ethnographic account of a women's mosque movement in Cairo, which is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Egypt. She seeks to expand Western liberal notions of freedom by untangling the seemingly contradictory nature of a women's mosque movement that both transforms male dominated spaces (i.e. mosques) while reifying discourses and practices that have historically been used to subordinate women to male authority (Mahmood 2005, 5). Through a focus on locally salient meanings and modes of agency, Mahmood attempts to parochialize normative assumptions of freedom that are central to Western liberal thought. She is especially critical of the idealization of freedom as a concept, particularly the idea that agency must necessarily involve a struggle for (individual) freedom. Thus, freedom becomes defined through conformity or resistance to social norms. She writes, "The desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject" (Ibid.). Mahmood argues for the decoupling of agency from resistance, which opens up possibilities for exercising agency within structures of power rather than outside or against it.

Allison Weir similarly agrees that Western liberal feminists should expand understandings of, and methods for analyzing, other forms of agency but differs from Mahmood on the question of freedom. Rather than questioning the ideal of freedom as central to feminist thought, Weir focuses on the importance of Mahmood's work in illustrating other modalities of freedom. Weir builds on Mahmood's work to reconceptualize freedom through belonging, which would entail "being supported in our care for one another, a freedom that is the capacity to participate fully in our relationships with one another" (Weir 2013, 336-337). This marks an important shift away from individual freedom and is helpful in theorizing women's collective action in repressive and authoritarian contexts. Taken together, these explications of freedom challenge reductive Western analyses of Middle East women as unfree subjects that lack agency, which remain central to orientalist imaginaries of places like Iran.

Postcolonial feminist scholars have also drawn important linkages between colonial discourses of oppressed 'third world' women (Mohanty 1986; Spivak 1988) and contemporary interventions to 'save' Muslim women from patriarchal societies (Mahmood 2008; Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Fernandes 2013). Lila Abu-Lughod traces the post-9/11 resurgence of gendered orientalist tropes to colonial representations of Muslim women as 'culturally distinct' and demonstrates, through the veil as a marker of tradition and subjugation, how Muslim women have historically been portrayed as the "mirror opposites of Western women" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 88). Drawing from her extensive ethnographic research in Egypt, Abu-Lughod argues that Western fixations on the veil as a symbol of oppression betrays a simplistic understanding of the meaning of freedom in Muslim women's everyday lives. Along with Mahmood (2005, 2008), Abu-Lughod also questions the tendency to frame women's rights through choice and freedom, while challenging assumptions that these values are inherently compromised in Muslim communities. She contextualizes the equation of unveiling with freedom as inextricably linked to the "contrast between the free and unfree [which] is at the core of contemporary American feminism, drawing on a powerful national ideology and political philosophy" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 20). In this sense, colonial representations of women's emancipation through (at times, state enforced) unveiling remains a symbol of a nation's modernity, a trope that endures in contemporary discourses of women's oppression in the Middle East (Kandiyoti 1991; Ahmed 1992, 2011; Moghadam 1994; Scott 2007). Abu-Lughod also demonstrates how the dominant Western narrative of Muslim women lacking the most basic of human rights has created a 'new common sense' of going to war to save Muslim women. Together,

Mahmood (2008) and Abu-Lughod (2013) offer incisive critiques of popular discourses of Muslim women's rights by explicating the historical relationship between Western feminism and empire, and tracing popular representations of women's oppression in the Middle Eastern to colonial tropes that equated the veil with tradition, backwardness, and unfreedom.

While Iran was never formally colonized, its modern trajectory was nonetheless shaped by Western imperialism, which continues to inform contemporary representations of gender and sexuality in Iran (Najmabadi 2005, 2008; Moallem 2008). As one example, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) examines how the European gaze influenced gender norms and sexual mores during the Qajar Period. She argues that European depictions of Iranians as sexually deviant and gender segregation as culturally backward lead to a transformation of gender relations in Iran. As one of the most visible markers of difference between gender and culture, the veil became a focus of intervention for both the Iranian monarchy (Qajar and Pahlavi) and European imperialists (Najmabadi 2005; Naghibi 2007).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, American and British feminists were complicit in the expansion of Western imperialism in Iran through the guise of women's liberation. Nima Naghibi (1999, 2007) traces alliances between Western feminists and elite Iranian women to 'save' veiled women by analyzing the intersections of nationalist, modernist, and Western feminist discourses. United in a 'global sisterhood,' these groups advocated for top down policies to emancipate Iranian women as part of the larger modernizing project of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-1979). This alliance enthusiastically supported the 1936 Unveiling Act, which resulted in the forced unveiling of Iranian women in public space. The 1983 Veiling Act, enacted in the wake of the 1979 Revolution, similarly left Iranian women bereft of choice. Importantly, as Naghibi astutely points out, these pieces of legislation claimed to "initiate revolutionary nationalist positions" and yet both acts had similar effects of the state disciplining women's bodies (Naghibi 2006, 38). She writes:

In both instances, legal and feminist discourses proffered the Iranian woman as a visible marker of the nation as either secular, modern, and Westernized, or alternatively, as Islamic, modern, and anti-imperialist. Beneath these two polarized representations lies a desire to possess and to control the figure behind the veil by unveiling or re-veiling her. (Ibid.)

Valentine Moghadam (2002) and Mino Moallem (2008) demonstrate how, as a result of both nationalist and geopolitical struggles, Iranian women's bodies are marked by dichotomous notions such as unfreedom/freedom, liberation/oppression, Islamic/secular, western/non-western, all of which are symbolized through women's relationships to the veil. As a result, Iranian women who fall outside of these binary logics (e.g. women who choose to veil) are rendered invisible through these reductive discursive formations (Moallem 2008, 32; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2017). Importantly, in post-revolutionary Iran, the historical relationships between Iranian elites and Western feminists is used to discredit and surveil women's rights movements, with Iranian government officials claiming that feminism is an imported ideology central to Western imperialism (Moghadam 2002).

Feminist geographers have also theorized how states exercise sociopolitical control over women's bodies through compulsory un/veiling, with particular attention to the relationship between gender, space, and mobility (Secor 2002; Fluri 2011; Gökarıksel 2009, 2012, 2020; Bagheri 2014, 2019). Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor have written extensively on Muslim women's sartorial practices in Turkey to complicate the framing of the Islamic veil as a signifier of oppression (see, for instance, Gökarıksel and Secor 2014). Moving beyond analyses of the veil as a corporeal marker that disciplines the body, Gökarıksel and Secor also consider the role of veiling in the production of public space. Secor (2002) describes Istanbul as a city marked by 'shifting regimes of veiling,' in which different veiling practices shape women's mobility in the city and sense of belonging in certain public spaces (Gökarıksel

2012, 2020). Through studies on the urban mobility of Muslim women in Istanbul, their research demonstrates how the act of veiling is a gendered, embodied socio-spatial practice. Gökarıksel and Secor's decades-long engagement with questions of space, subjectivity, and mobility within the context of secular and Islamist politics in Turkey reveal the complexities of veiling practices that are often simplified and misread by Western audiences (Gökarıksel 2009; Gökarıksel and Secor 2014).

While acknowledging social limitations and material conditions that can affect women's spatial behaviors in repressive contexts, feminist geographers have also demonstrated how different veiling practices can enable certain forms of freedom through increased spatial mobility (Secor 2002; Gökarıksel 2012; Fluri 2011; Bagheri 2014, 2019). Nazgol Bagheri examines women's increased urban mobility in post-revolutionary Iran, paying particular attention to how women appropriate certain veiling styles to traverse socio-spatially segregated areas in Tehran (Bagheri 2014, 2019). Similar to Secor (2002) and Gokriksel's (2012, 2020) analyses of the spatial politics of the veil, Bagheri's work demonstrates how certain veiling practices influence women's sense of belonging in certain places in Tehran. Bagheri's research demonstrates how access to certain public spaces, such as 'modern' shopping areas, can offer Tehrani women a 'new sense of freedom' (Bagheri 2014). Importantly, by illustrating how women deliberately style their hijab to navigate different areas of Tehran, Bagheri's work reveals how "Iranian women creatively negotiate the landscape of power and difference as well as strategically (re)produce their identities while on the move" (Bagheri 2014, 319). Jennifer Fluri and Rachel Lehr (2017) examine how veiling practices in Afghanistan have been used for various geopolitical and geoeconomic processes to demonstrate the utility of the veil in women's daily lives. More specifically, Fluri (2009, 2011) explores how women's mobility in Afghanistan is enabled through the *chardori*, arguing that the veil functions as a form of mobile security. She further illustrates how the language of women's rights have become embedded within geopolitical entanglements in Afghanistan, particularly through representations of liberation through unveiling, which paradoxically worsen women's rights in Afghanistan (Fluri 2011). These findings illuminate how different veiling practices can enable mobility and can be used strategically to navigate public space.

Collectively, these insights from postcolonial feminist scholars and feminist geography literature provide expanded understandings of freedom and agency, and reveal how enduring orientalist imaginaries of Middle Eastern women are implicated in US imperialism in this region. I draw from this scholarship to demonstrate the immense complexity of feminist activism in Iran, including efforts to politically mobilize in both public and virtual space, and to trouble how the concept of freedom is deployed in relation to anti-compulsory hijab protests. These findings are especially important to contextualize the advent of hashtag feminism which, when applied to feminist movements in Iran, risk oversimplifying and misrepresenting gender injustice in Iran through "enacting a liberal feminist salvation narrative that has long been critiqued for being a handmaiden of imperial expansions and interventions in the global south" (Khoja-Moolji 2015).

I also draw from Gillian Rose's (2001) critical visual methodology in my discussion of the relationship between "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF) and the "Girls of Revolution Street" (GRS), and in my analysis of the dissonance between the MSF's stated aims and images featured on the MSF Facebook site. Rose's assertion that visual objects function as a type of discourse is especially useful for analyzing how images circulated by MSF render "certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable" (Rose 2001, 137) which, in turn, reproduce particular imaginaries of Iranian women. While

I do not explicitly draw from my ethnographic work in this article, my analysis is informed by my long-term research on social justice movements in Iran.<sup>10</sup>

### MSF, GRS, and the Politics of Familiarity

Masih Alinejad, a self-exiled Iranian journalist and activist based in New York, created the MSF Facebook site in May 2014 that provided a virtual space for Iranian women to post images of themselves removing their veils. Within a week, the site garnered 130,000 likes, primarily from Iranian Facebook users, and has since cultivated a sizeable international following (BBC 2014). Interestingly, Alinejad has maintained that MSF is not a political website and that supporters of MSF are “not women activists, but just ordinary women talking from their hearts” (Ibid.). This disavowal of the political may have been necessary to attract Iranian followers given heightened state surveillance following the 2009 Green Movement protests (Ranjbar 2017).

The images uploaded to MSF are highly stylized and typically feature beautiful, young Iranian women. MSF photos are usually taken with filters against stunning backdrops of secluded beaches, forests, and mountains in Iran.<sup>11</sup> The images that are most visible on MSF – through likes, reposts, and other forms of circulation – tend to share a similar aesthetic. The women are usually smiling and wear colorful clothing that emulate ‘Western’ fashion, and often pose with perfectly coifed hair and impeccably applied makeup. Photos of beaming women on MSF are often accompanied by pithy captions such as, “It’s sad that my pretty black hair’s going grey and it hasn’t seen the color of wind, sun, or rain yet” آزادی بیواشکی #mystealthyfreedom.<sup>12</sup>

MSF photos of attractive, unveiled women offer US audiences an alluring glimpse into a country that has been politically isolated since the 1979 Revolution. MSF public posts are compelling for US audiences who cannot travel to Iran and have minimal exposure to contemporary feminist issues in the country. Far from the dominant US media images of dour Iranian women in dark veils, MSF features images of smiling and confident women eager to share secret rebellious acts with the world. MSF images also convey a sense of familiarity by mirroring popular US social media aesthetics. To this end, MSF does succeed in subverting dominant Western narratives of Iranian women as abject and lacking political agency by showcasing collective (albeit virtual) resistance to compulsory hijab. This form of resistance which is enabled through a US-based social media platform is, however, essentially read as Western, with Iranian women simultaneously positioned as both familiar and other to US audiences.

Photographs from the GRS protests are starkly different from the carefully curated images featured on MSF. In images from the GRS demonstrations, the solitary female protesters look down at the crowds and appear pensive, precarious, and vulnerable. While MSF images reflect an attentiveness to aesthetics, photographs from the GRS protests are taken by bystanders and, as a result, are grainy and

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<sup>10</sup> This work includes several months of qualitative research on social justice movements from 2013-2016 in the northern Iranian provinces of Mazandaran, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan. Additionally, as a dual citizen of the US and Iran, I have travelled frequently to Iran since 2003. During research trips and family visits, I have observed different forms of political mobilization in Iran and how various social justice movements are reconfigured through US social media platforms (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) for US audiences. I am often struck by the disconnect between how social movements articulate their aims for social change within Iran and how these movements are represented to US audiences.

<sup>11</sup> Dehghan, Saeed Kamali. 2014. “Iranian Women Post Pictures of Themselves without Hijabs on Facebook.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/12/iran-women-hijab-facebook-pictures-alinejad> (accessed on December 15, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> My Stealthy Freedom. 2014. Facebook, July 14, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/photos/a.859102224103873/919585988055496/?type=3>



blurry. The photographs from Vida Movahedi's initial protest, for example, were taken from afar and only show her from a side angle. Far from the pristine backgrounds featured in MSF images, GRS protesters stand on busy urban street corners that are named after the 1979 Revolution. The GRS protesters are not conventionally fashionable by either Iranian or American standards. Unlike the brightly colored chic clothing that is common in MSF photos, GRS protesters wear understated clothing that shifts the focus from their bodies to their acts of civil disobedience.<sup>13</sup> For instance, images from Movahedi's December 2017 protest show that her hair was not styled and she dressed down in loose fitting jeans, a black sweater, and sneakers.

The GRS protests were clearly not staged for global consumption. Rather, the protests were a critique of domestic politics with the aim of demanding increased socio-political rights for Iranian women. Unlike MSF posts that include English translations that make struggles against compulsory hijab legible to Western audiences, the GRS demonstrators protested in silence and without signs. Signs and slogans were unnecessary for Iranians who are intimately familiar with historical and contemporary contestations over the veil. However, as I have argued elsewhere, perhaps this refusal to translate the aims of these protests was an important measure to protect their burgeoning movement from appropriation by external actors (Ranjbar 2017). It is within this context that the MSF founder, Masih Alinejad, assumed the role of translating the meaning and significance of these protests to US audiences. She did so primarily by re-branding GRS protests as an offshoot of MSF.

### ***The Wind as a Symbol of Freedom, and Other Orientalist Tropes***

My earlier description of the strategic use of stylized photos on MSF is not to discredit the participation of women on MSF, but rather to suggest that its social currency in the US is, in part, due to enduring Western fantasies about the lives of Iranian women. Photos that are uploaded to MSF are part of a collective resistance to the Iranian government's regressive policies; however, these images are also suggestive of colonial representations of Iranian women that persist today.

In her re-telling of the origins of the MSF, Alinejad recalls a formative trip to London in 2014. During her travels, Alinejad posted a photo to Facebook that shows her running down a picturesque treelined street, elated, with her arms wide open and her hair flying behind her.

Once I posted pictures of myself in London, free, without a scarf. I received messages from Iranian women saying, "Don't publish these pictures because we envy you." Soon after I published another picture of myself driving in my hometown in Iran, again without a scarf. And I said to Iranian women, "I bet you can do the same." Many of them started to send me their photos without hijab, so I created a page called My Stealthy Freedom. (Kowalska 2014)

The London picture is now prominently centered on the MyStealthyFreedom.org website, under the heading "The photograph that launched a movement."<sup>14</sup>

In her account, London is the quintessential free society, as evidenced by Alinejad's ability to run through the streets with her hair uncovered (running is not illegal for women, but discouraged in Iran). She then juxtaposed this joyous London moment with a similar act in a northern Iranian town to

<sup>13</sup> Steafel, Eleanor. 2018. "How Iran's Brave Women are Fighting for the Right to Ditch their Hijabs." *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/irans-brave-women-fighting-right-ditch-hijabs/> (accessed on December 15, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> My Stealthy Freedom. 2020. "The Photograph that Launched a Movement." *My Stealthy Freedom*. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/our-story/> (accessed on August 11, 2019).

demonstrate the significant risks of unveiling in public space. This story is powerful in that it clearly illustrates everyday restrictions that are a near universal experience for women in Iran. For US audiences, the feeling of wind in one's hair is so unremarkable that the denial of this experience has become a rallying cry in support of Iranian women's rights. In this sense, the wind is symbolic of universal freedoms denied to Iranian women on the basis of their gender, as well as an opening for cross-cultural feminist solidarity facilitated through the MSF Facebook page. The phrase "wind in my hair" was, in fact, so compelling that it was adopted as the official symbol for MSF. Images that are uploaded to or reposted through the site are now branded with a white outline of a woman holding a veil that is billowing out above her head from the wind.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this catchphrase is also a familiar orientalist trope predicated on the colonial project of liberating women through unveiling (Kandiyoti 1991; Ahmed 1992; Moghadam 1994; Abu-Lughod 2013). Further, the white scarf in the MSF logo reads familiar to US feminists as a symbol of the US women's suffrage movement.

Through MSF's sleek visual representations and pithy narratives of gender-based oppression in Iran, this online movement has gained the support of powerful US allies. In Alinejad's 2018 memoir, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran*, she recounts the encouragement that she received from Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook and the founder of the Lean In Foundation. In her autobiography, Alinejad discusses Sandberg's ongoing support for MSF, including a speech Sandberg gave at the 2014 *Fortune* magazine's Most Powerful Women Summit. She writes that Sandberg became "...choked up when she talked about her favorite picture on the site, whose accompanying text she had someone translate for her. "The grandmother writes, 'I wanted my granddaughter to feel the wind through her hair before it goes gray'" (Alinejad 2018, 313-314). A number of posts on MSF similarly play on the theme of wind in statements on freedom. For example, in a post from January 2015, a woman writes:

It's an amazing feeling when wind tangles your hair under the blue sky. Let them mock me for one of my never had simplest desire. We are living with many constraints everyday but is there anything more important than when we can't even have equal rights with men under wind, rain or sun for one minute. #آزادی یواشکی<sup>16</sup>

Sandberg has publicly stated that MSF is her favorite Facebook page while also using MSF to assert that Facebook is a force for good in struggles for social justice. Alinejad has similarly attributed much of her campaign's success to Facebook, both as an important medium of communication for social justice movements and as a means of facilitating cross-cultural feminist collaboration. Alinejad has also credited MSF and, by extension, Facebook with giving Iranian women a platform to reclaim their voices following the 1979 revolution, stating, "From far away, those *voiceless women* can express themselves *for the first time* in more than 30 years" (Kowalska 2014; emphasis added). While her intention may have been to highlight how social media platforms enable Iranian women to communicate with audiences outside of Iran – which is challenging given Iran's political isolation over the past four decades – the

<sup>15</sup> My Stealthy Freedom. 2020. Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/>.

<sup>16</sup> My Stealthy Freedom. 2015. Facebook, January 7, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/photos/please-see-the-english-translation-below%D8%AE%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%87-%DA%A9-%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%A2%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A2%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%BE/1047724138575013/>

assertion that Iranian women are ‘voiceless’ effectively erases the rich history of feminist activism in Iran. This excerpt from a 2014 interview is particularly troubling because it also ignores the pivotal role of feminist activists in the 2009 Green Movement protests (Bashi 2010; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2010; Dabashi 2011), thus recentring Alinejad and a particular form of neoliberal feminist activism. In both Alinejad and Sandberg’s narratives, the ‘West’ remains something for Iranian women to aspire towards, with US technology providing the medium for ‘voiceless women’ to freely express themselves.

In the acknowledgements section of her autobiography, Alinejad also credits Sandberg with the idea to write her book, reflecting, “I wasn’t convinced that my story would appeal to a Western audience” (Alinejad 2018, 360). Alinejad’s autobiography joins the “plethora of recently published nonfiction bestsellers written by Muslim women about their personal suffering at the hands of Islam’s supposedly incomparable misogynist practices” (Mahmood 2008, 83) and illustrates how “gendered Orientalism has taken on a new life and new forms in our feminist twenty-first century” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 202). In this sense, the legibility of Alinejad’s personal story to a US audience rests on reproducing Western tropes about the oppression of Iranian women and conforming to narrow frames of feminist activism (e.g. unveiling as feminist praxis). More broadly, the appeal of MSF as a transnational social media campaign relies on English language translations, as well as familiarity with Facebook as the dominant social media platform globally. For example, shortly after Sandberg’s 2014 *Fortune* speech in which she cites the importance of translation, MSF began publishing English and French translations of its posts, ostensibly to make the material more accessible to Western audiences. Languages like Arabic, which could help build solidarity between MSF and anti-compulsory hijab campaigns in places like Saudi Arabia, are conspicuously absent on MSF, raising questions about the intended audience for the site and the stated aims of transnational feminist solidarity.

### ***Embodying Freedom in Spaces of Stealth***

The name of Alinejad’s Facebook site, “My Stealthy Freedom,” similarly reproduces orientalist tropes about Iranian women. ‘Stealth’ conveys the necessary caution that women must exhibit when unveiling in public spaces in Iran, although the uploaded photos are usually taken in isolated locations where there is minimal risk. Stealth also implies secrecy, a theme in colonial-era visual and literary representations of the coquettish, “semiclad yet veiled harem woman” who suggestively unveiled for outsiders in Iran (Naghibi 2007, 71). In reality, MSF is far from a stealthy operation; rather, it functions as an open secret. As a public Facebook site, it operates through public consumption, with curated images and catchy captions circulated among and consumed by global audiences in the name of feminist solidarity.

Similar to ‘stealth,’ the ‘freedom’ in “My Stealthy Freedom” carries particular connotations in relation to Iran specifically, and the Middle East more broadly. MSF highlights how mandatory hijab deprives Iranian women of their dignity and rights; however, these simplified narratives of gender injustice reify a dominant Western narrative of needing to ‘save’ Iranian women from a backwards and fundamentalist society. As Abu-Lughod (2013) and others have argued, savior tropes about Muslim women lacking freedom remains a common refrain in the US and carries a political imperative that has been used to justify US imperialism in the Muslim-majority world. ‘Freedom’ is a particularly loaded term given the history of US military interventions to ‘advance democracy’ in the region and current escalating tensions between the Iranian government and the Trump administration.

Alinejad is certainly aware of what the words ‘stealth’ and ‘freedom’ evoke for American audiences, which she has juxtaposed with allusions to regime change in Iran. One particularly striking example is Alinejad’s frequent comparison between wearing hijab and being taken hostage. For many Americans, the term hostage evokes the 1979-1981 Iran hostage crisis, when fifty-two American diplomats were held captive in the US Embassy in Tehran. This event caused irreparable damage to the

US-Iran relationship and the two countries still have not reestablished diplomatic ties, causing immense hardship for Iranians and Iranian Americans. In her 2018 autobiography, Alinejad writes:

I had deliberately used the term “hostage,” which obviously is full of meaning; the Islamic Republic had solidified its rule in 1979 through the management of the hostage crisis. The Islamic Republic had turned my hair into a hostage—and not just my hair but the hair of all Iranian women. (Alinejad 2018, 283)

These loaded references have led to harsh critiques within Iran of Alinejad conflating feminist activism with regime change. Alinejad has also been criticized for meeting with hawkish Trump administration officials. For example, following a February 2019 meeting between Alinejad and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Pompeo publicly referenced MSF to argue for more aggressive US policies toward Iran (Moaveni 2018). Needless to say, the conflation of women’s rights activism in Iran with regime change endangers both MSF supporters and GRS protesters and, importantly, reveals deep tensions between activists who have remained or cannot leave Iran and those who are based in the US.

### **Troubling Representations of Freedom and Choice in the GRS Protests**

Alinejad characterizes MSF as an apolitical campaign against compulsory hijab in Iran,<sup>17</sup> as opposed to an anti-hijab movement. This distinction is important as it is attentive to the history of state-enforced un/veiling in Iran and signals the importance of choice in the struggle for women’s rights. Additionally, the focus on ‘freedom of choice’ is also legible to Western liberal feminists who center the importance of choice in other social justice movements, such as reproductive justice. Alinejad insists that MSF advocates for freedom of choice; however, in practice, the site focuses almost exclusively on freedom from hijab. Rather than depicting choice, I argue that MSF reproduces Western liberal notions of freedom that, paradoxically, circumscribe women’s ability to choose how they want to appear in public space.

The overdetermined relationship between freedom and unveiling on the Facebook site undermines MSF’s more ambitious social justice goals, specifically the advancement of freedom of choice. MSF’s nearly singular focus on hijab erases the multifaceted reality of gender injustice in Iran and, as such, reads familiar to US audiences primed to equate Middle Eastern women’s oppression with the veil. Far from representing the complex and varied debates about women’s rights in Iran, freedom is visually represented on MSF as the act of unveiling, thus conforming to narrow frames of feminist activism and orientalist tropes. MSF images of ‘free,’ unveiled Iranian women are positioned against what is unseen in these photos, namely, the dominant US imaginary of the veiled and ‘oppressed’ Iranian woman popularized in accounts of post-revolutionary Iran. An important illustration of the freedom/oppression binary vis-à-vis the veil is the almost complete absence of religious women who oppose mandatory veiling on MSF. This absence reproduces the colonial binary of the emancipated feminist versus the veiled traditional woman, thereby erasing the presence of Iranian feminists who choose to veil.

### ***A Protest on the Periphery***

On Wednesday, January 31, 2018, an unidentified woman in the city of Mashhad joined the anti-compulsory hijab protests. Similar to the GRS protesters in Tehran, the young Mashhadi woman stood

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<sup>17</sup> My Stealthy Freedom. 2020. “Mission.” *My Stealthy Freedom*. <https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/our-story/> (accessed on August 11, 2019).

on top of a utility box in a busy intersection, waving a black scarf from a stick.<sup>18</sup> This marked the first GRS protest in Mashhad, a socially and politically conservative city in northeastern Iran. One of the most noticeable ways that this demonstration diverged from earlier protests is that the Mashhadi protester wore hijab while openly challenging compulsory veiling. This protester was not identified in the media and we know little about her, other than her conviction against mandatory hijab. Despite not even knowing the woman's name, in the scant English-language media coverage of this protest, the protester is characterized as both religious and conservative, solely on the basis of her clothing. She is described as a conservative woman offering 'unexpected support' and standing 'in solidarity with' GRS protesters, as opposed to being recognized as a GRS protester herself (Dehghan 2018; Malm 2018). The conservative label effectively characterized her as an aberration in the GRS protests, which was used to suggest that the Iranian regime is so restrictive that even religious women were compelled to support the GRS protesters. Following her demonstration, the unidentified woman became *the* visual representation of religious women's support for the anti-compulsory hijab movement. I argue that the disproportionate focus on her choice of clothing rather than her activism reproduces Western fixations on the hijab, thus rendering the radical nature of her protest illegible to US audiences because it did not conform to liberal notions of agency and freedom.

The persistent focus on the hijab itself diminished the significance of this protest for the broader anti-compulsory hijab movement. First, this protest made visible resistance to compulsory veiling in conservative areas of Iran. The GRS movement began in Tehran with Vida Movahedi's December 2017 protest and subsequent demonstrations were largely held in Iran's capital. Within Iran, Tehran is viewed as a liberal metropolis with recent social justice movements originating in the capital, such as the 1999 student protests (i.e. 18<sup>th</sup> of Tir) and the 2009 Green Movement. While Mashhad may seem peripheral to audiences outside of Iran, it is the second most populous city in Iran and an economic hub in the region. As a religious city and a site of political authority, Mashhad also functions as a microcosm of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, staging a protest in Mashhad signaled support for GRS beyond the more liberal regions of Iran.

Second, this courageous act demonstrated this woman's deep commitment to freedom of choice. The image of an ostensibly religious woman in a conservative city challenging compulsory hijab was a powerful illustration of how one's personal decision to wear the veil does not translate to imposing hijab on others. Simply put, this protester exposed the problematics of conflating compulsory hijab with one's personal beliefs. Her activism is further underscored by the tremendous risk of staging a protest during this particular period. In winter 2017, there were mass protests in Mashhad following mounting frustrations about economic inequality, unemployment, inflation, and rising prices of essential goods. In addition to the tense political climate in Mashhad, the January 2018 GRS protest took place during the active targeting of feminist activists by the state.

Third, this protest was an important step towards creating a more inclusive social justice movement. It created an opening for religious women who support freedom of choice to become involved in struggles over compulsory veiling. As noted earlier, feminist activism in Iran has largely been framed through the binary of the religious and secular and, correspondingly, with pro-hijab versus anti-veiling sentiments. However, these binary logics obscure the reality of Iranian women choosing to veil for a variety of reasons. For instance, the veil can symbolize Islamic ideals of modesty and, during the Revolution, some women voluntarily began wearing hijab to contest imposed unveiling under the Pahlavi

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<sup>18</sup> Radio Zamaneh. 2018. "Ali Motahari: There is No Obligation for Women to Wear Hijab." *Radio Zamaneh*. <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/379438> (accessed on December 11, 2019).

monarchy (Moallem 2015). These reductive characterizations also correspond with broader assumptions around class, education, and political beliefs, which has led to the social exclusion of religious and lower class women from feminist movements, many of which are based in Tehran (e.g. One Million Signatures Campaign).

Fourth, this protest reveals current divisions within Iranian society over the type of hijab that women wear (Zahedi 2007). English-language coverage of the Mashhad protest largely focused on the hijab itself; however, within Iran, the style of hijab was significant for other reasons. There are many different types of hijab in Iran, with various styles conveying meanings about political convictions, religious beliefs, class, education, and other markers of social difference (Naghibi 2007; Zahedi 2007; Bagheri 2019). There are state-sanctioned forms of hijab (e.g. *chador* and *maghnaeh*) that are enforced in certain spaces, including government institutions and universities. However, in other public places, women can wear more casual styles of dress that are, at times, tolerated by state authorities. There are also regional styles of dress that are influenced by other factors, including rural versus urban communities, traditional dress that varies by province, fashion trends, etc. Women who dress more modestly (i.e. *chador*) as opposed to more casual forms of hijab (e.g. *shawl*) are generally viewed as politically and religiously conservative and, therefore, more likely to be politically aligned with the government.

The Mashhadi protester challenged these assumptions by donning a modest form of hijab that is largely favored by religiously conservative women while protesting gender-based oppression in Iran. She wore a white *pichih*, a type of facial veil that fully covers the hair, with a black *chador* that covered her clothing. Her choice of hijab was noticeable within Iran because wearing the state-sanctioned *chador* with *pichih*, instead of more casual or 'revealing' forms of hijab, is considered to be a deliberate decision that conveys modesty and religiosity. It is also important to note that Mashhad is renowned for its religious sites that are sacred to Shi'ite Muslims and, because it is more socially and politically conservative relative to other places in Iran, women tend to dress more modestly in this region.<sup>19</sup>

The types of hijab that were used as props in the GRS protests also carry particular social meanings. During the December 2017 protest, Movahedi removed her white shawl as part of her demonstration. The shawl is a loose fitting veil that is generally preferred by secular women because it is relatively easy to style and, importantly, to adjust quickly. For example, if a woman needs to appear more modest in public space, she can easily adjust her shawl to cover all of her hair and, in more casual settings like a cafe, she can loosen or push the shawl back to show more hair. It is likely that Movahedi wore the shawl, as opposed to *chador*, in her daily life. It is therefore significant that, during the January 2018 demonstration, the Mashhadi protester wore a *chador* while waving a black shawl from a stick, reproducing an important element from Movahedi's initial December 2017 protest. This element of the protest symbolized the importance of choice that is central to the anti-compulsory hijab movement, both in terms of whether to wear hijab and the type of veil women choose to wear.

As the only highly visible instance of an outwardly religious woman participating in the GRS protests, the Mashhad protester became defined through her difference and effectively relegated to the periphery of the movement. Despite her critical contributions to the anti-compulsory hijab movement, the sole focus on the protester's hijab was further magnified in news stories in which images of the

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<sup>19</sup> As a personal example, while conducting research in Iran in 2013, I received several warnings about my loosely fitting shawl from female Guidance Patrol officers in Mashhad and elsewhere in the Khorasan Province. I did not experience this level of surveillance in the seven provinces that I travelled to during this same period.

Mashhadi woman were always preceded by photos of the unveiled GSF protesters. The implicit comparisons between the now iconic photo of the unveiled Movahedi protesting on Revolution Street and the Mashhad woman in *chador* accomplished a key ideological function. This reductive analysis ultimately positioned the Mashhadi protester as a signifier of tradition and religiosity, compared with the unveiled Tehran protesters who represented the promise of progress, secularism, and modernity in Iran. At best, the Mashhadi protester was represented as a secondary figure in solidarity with women publicly unveiling for freedom, as opposed to her tangible contributions to creating a more inclusive social justice movement centered on the right to choose.

The relative absence of GRS protesters in hijab on MSF, and the focus on *chador* in the negligible media coverage of the Mashhad protest, marginalized the role of religious women coalescing in support of freedom of choice in Iran. Unveiling as an act of resistance is familiar to Western audiences and reproduces a colonial trope of liberation through the act of unveiling, whereas the Mashhadi woman's activism was unintelligible because it did not conform to liberal notions of agency and freedom. As such, the act of unveiling in public space was implied to be more radical and, indeed, more feminist than the fight for choice while wearing hijab.

### **Making Visible the Unfamiliar**

In this article, I complicate what 'we' in the Global North recognize as feminist activism in Iran. Specifically, I compared two different, albeit related, anti-compulsory hijab movements to elucidate a politics of recognition that reproduces liberal notions of freedom and political agency. Through an analysis of how the concept of 'freedom' is articulated in narratives of anti-compulsory hijab protests, I demonstrate how feminist movements in Iran become legible, and thereby visible, to mainstream US audiences when they conform to narrow frames of feminist activism and orientalist tropes.

Both GRS and MSF use the issue of compulsory hijab to illustrate gender-based oppression in Iran, yet these movements diverge significantly in their representations of freedom and modalities of activism. While both movements are ostensibly centered on freedom of choice, in practice, MSF's nearly singular focus on hijab reproduces narrow conceptualizations of freedom as unveiling. Undoubtedly, the GRS protesters drew inspiration from the #WhiteWednesdays campaign launched by MSF in 2017, and Alinejad's efforts to circulate the GRS protest footage among her international followers certainly increased international media coverage of the GRS protests. However, Alinejad's re-branding of GRS protests as an offshoot of MSF, combined with her narrow focus on freedom from hijab, minimized important dimensions of the GRS protests to global audiences.

MSF's reductive framing of hijab as the antithesis to freedom simplifies the complex and varied debates about women's rights in Iran and flattens the radical acts of civil disobedience – like the GRS protests – that are circulated on MSF. In this way, the strategic framing of women's rights through campaigns like MSF does more to attract international support than to address the multi-faceted nature of gender injustice in Iran. Given Alinejad's success in gaining support from neoliberal US feminists and sustaining media coverage of MSF, the singular framing of gender injustice through compulsory hijab demonstrates how Iranian feminist movements gain global visibility by connecting their grievances to popular imaginaries of women's rights in Iran. This, paradoxically, rests on Iranian women reproducing themselves as the vulnerable 'unfree' other.

For GRS protesters, compulsory hijab functioned as a signifier of gender-based oppression; however, their demonstrations extended beyond resistance to mandatory veiling. Rather, their demands for 'freedom' indexed broader demands, including the expansion of socio-political rights such as the right to protest and to freely participate in public life. The GRS protests – largely staged in public spaces named after the 1979 Revolution – were a scathing critique of domestic policies that have drastically curtailed Iranian women's socio-political rights since 1979. The GRS protests were so impactful within

Iran because they laid bare how policies to ‘protect’ women instead enable state violence against women, both in the everyday enforcement of hijab and in the draconian punishment of peaceful protesters. In response to the perceived threat of solitary women demonstrating against mandatory hijab, the Iranian government actively targeted feminist activists, which included intimidation, arrests, and meting out long prison sentences. Consequently, many GRS protesters remain in prison or have been forced into exile (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2019).

Notably, the participation of diverse women across different provinces demonstrates both the importance and the inclusivity of the GRS protests and, importantly, offers an anti-orientalist lens into contemporary feminist activism in Iran. First, while the initial GRS demonstrations began in Tehran, demonstrations quickly spread to other parts of the country, indicating support for the protests in more socially and religiously conservative cities (e.g. Mashhad). This corresponds with recent findings from government surveys which found that nearly half of Iran’s population opposes compulsory hijab (Center for Strategic Studies 2014; Javadi Yeganeh 2015). Second, religious women were active participants in the protests. Returning to the earlier discussion of gendered orientalism, images of veiled GRS protesters disrupts simplistic depictions of the emancipated feminist versus the veiled traditional woman. The participation of veiled women in the GRS movement powerfully illustrates that one’s personal choice to wear a veil should not be equated with support for mandatory hijab. Further, and in line with the reformist movement in Iran, this demonstrates that practicing Muslims can challenge a regime whose authority is based on religion, and Iranian feminists can resist gender-based oppression and seek reform while not wanting to overthrow the government. This leads me to my third point, which is perhaps the most urgent in this political moment. This form of activism resists simplistic narratives of needing to save Iranian women from a repressive government. This stands in sharp contrast with Alinejad’s recent foray into lobbying jingoistic Trump administration officials who support regime change as critical to Iranian women’s emancipation (Heritage Foundation 2018; U.S. Virtual Embassy in Iran 2019). Through MSF, Alinejad has been enormously successful in mobilizing global public opinion against the Iranian government. However, her campaign to influence US policy makers to adopt more stringent measures towards Iran has, paradoxically, resulted in greater risk for feminist activists who remain in – or cannot leave – Iran.

As solitary protesters, the GRS women displayed incredible bravery aimed at fundamentally transforming domestic politics and asserting women’s political participation in Iran. It was both the boldness and courage of Vida Movahedi’s initial protest in December 2017 that inspired dozens of women to follow suit and, as a collective movement, GRS continues to shape public discourse on Iranian women’s rights from Tehran to the US.

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