

CYBERFEMINISM IN IRAN

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Iranian feminist movement, which has about 100 years old history, covers several areas such as the press, literature, cinema, and cyberspace. All these fields are focused on the sensitive problem of women's rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the effort to raise public awareness about women's role and duties in the country where every aspect of a person's life is subordinated to Islam.

Modern Iranian women face completely new challenges in the "Information Age" (Castells). The growing development of information technologies has opened up a wide area for female activists both internationally and regionally. This is the era where they can create a completely new identity through the influence of modern technology with the synthesis of tradition and modernity as a mean of struggle against religious dogmas and defending women's rights.

In the 21st century, the Internet and social space have taken the form of a virtual organization that allows activists of various backgrounds, including feminists, to propagate their slogans or ideas. It is the synthesis of the Internet and women's activism that has created the notion of cyberfeminism.

Cyberfeminism as a discourse or wave emerged back in the 1990's. Yet, at the beginning of the 1980s, a solid foundation for further development of the movement was provided by Donna Haraway's work "Cyborg Manifest."

The widespread adoption of cyberfeminism within feminist and scientific theoretical circles emerged prominently during the 1990s, coinciding with the influential contributions of Professor-Philosopher Sadie Plant from Warwick University and the Australian media collective VNS Matrix.

The interaction between Feminism and cyber-space may be one of the arguable and controversial cases. But today, many agree (e.g., Sociologists) that media and cyber-space have an emancipatory potential and are capable of re-understanding traditional gender roles and breaking down existing stereotypes.

Within the Middle Eastern Region, the Internet has emerged as a potent tool for mass communication and protest campaigns, notably demonstrated by events such as the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 and the Arab Spring in 2011. Subsequently, these movements and protests earned the designation of "Facebook and Twitter revolutions."

The unprecedented growth in the number of internet users in Iran since 2009 has catalyzed global discussions on various political, cultural, and social issues, including matters pertaining to women. The nascent stages of Iranian Cyberfeminism are traceable to the early 2000s, with the inception of women-oriented websites such as "Zanan-e Iran" in 2000 and the establishment of the first feminist website, "Trubun-e Zanan," in 2002 under the auspices of the Women Cultural Centre.

Despite repressions and challenges faced by these platforms, activists persisted, exemplified by the formation of "Zanestan." Prominent figures like Parvin Ardalan played pivotal roles in these initiatives, contributing to the broader context of the one million signature campaign.

The landscape of Iranian Cyberfeminism in the 2000s featured the involvement of non-governmental organizations and activists utilizing various feminist web pages, such as "Meidane Zanan," "Qanune Zanan," and "Taghiir baraye Barabari." Contemporary active sites include "Madreseye Feministi" (<http://www.feministschool.com/>) and "Bidarzani" (<http://bidarzani.com/17182>), offering diverse content related to women's issues.

Noteworthy feminist sites operating beyond Iran's borders include "Shabakeye Hambastegie Iran" (<http://www.iran-women-solidarity.net/>), "Ma Zanan" (<http://mazanan.com/>), "Polhayii Baraye Zanan" (<http://bridgesforwomen.org/>), "Machooland" (<http://macholand.org/>), and the widely recognized "My Stealthy Freedom." Despite originating from outside Iran, the latter campaign boasts substantial support within the country.

Launched in 2014 by Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad, "My Stealthy Freedom" Campaign focuses on promoting the voices of Iranian women and their struggle for their rights. Initially centered on the opposition to compulsory hijab, the campaign expanded over time, addressing a spectrum of sensitive issues and aspects of Iranian women's lives under strict Islamic laws. The campaign stands as a symbol of women's quest for freedom in the face of these challenges.

"My Stealthy Freedom" campaign has manifested through various hashtag waves, delineated by distinct themes, each initiated by the supporters' posts on social media, preceded by the overarching campaign hashtag, #MyStealthyFreedom. Notable among the early hashtag campaigns was #myforbiddensong صدایمنحقم. Subsequently, #MenInHijab مردان-باحجاب garnered significant attention, encouraging Iranian men to express support and solidarity with women by posting photos of themselves dressed in Islamic women's attire, particularly the chador. The campaign conveyed a message advocating respect for individual freedom within families and opposing the imposition of compulsory hijab.

In 2016, in response to a fatwa issued by Ali Khamenei prohibiting women from cycling in public spaces or in the presence of strangers, a new wave of hashtags emerged within the "My Stealthy Freedom" campaign. Notably, #IranianWomenLoveCycling - من_عاشق_دوچرخه-ام gained momentum, emphasizing that Iranian women would not alter their lifestyle in response to fatwas or interventions by the Morality Police.

Following this, the most resonant and sustained hashtag era, #WhiteWednesdays, commenced, attracting hundreds of supporters from its inception. Unlike previous short-lived waves, #WhiteWednesdays persisted, evolving into a radical and nearly independent movement. The movement inadvertently sparked another campaign known as #girlsfromtherevolutionstreet.

#MyCameraIsMyWeapon (دوربین_ما_اسلحه_ما), can be contextualized as a sub-wave of the broader #WhiteWednesdays movement. Primarily encapsulated within the overarching initiative of "My camera is my weapon," this campaign focused on documenting instances of perceived human rights violations. Specifically, the campaign targeted instances of women allegedly dressed inappropriately according to Islamic norms, falling under the purview of the "Bad Hijab" campaign. Instances of such violations were

meticulously recorded in video format and disseminated through the "My Stealthy Freedom" pages, contributing to a discourse on adherence to cultural and religious norms.

The tragic death of 22-year-old Kurdish girl Mahsa (Jina) Amini On September 16th, 2022, for violating Islamic laws became a rallying point during unprecedented nationwide demonstrations. The prominent slogan, both online and offline, became #zan_zendegi_azadi زن_زندگی_آزاد (woman_hotness_freedom). This hashtag gained widespread support across diverse nationalities, religious views, and backgrounds, coalescing under a unified cause. Masih Alinejad, the author of "My stealthy freedom," assumed a pivotal role as a reporter, documenting and disseminating protest footage, thereby transforming into an international ambassador for Iranian women's rights.

In the history of Iranian cyberfeminism, the most flexible and relaxed period coincides with the presidency of the relatively liberal Hassan Rouhani. However, questions persisted regarding the mobilization and unification of masses online in a country where the Internet and social networks faced periodic, varying levels of censorship to mitigate perceived Western influences. The events surrounding the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 altered the Iranian socio-political landscape, catalyzing large-scale protests and prompting a reevaluation of cyberfeminist efficacy in the physical realm.

The mass protests of 2022-23 significantly reduced internet censorship in Iran, challenging the conventional notion of cyberfeminism. But as Mehrangiz Kar, the human rights defender and activist, says: "Iran is a paradoxical country. It creates roles under the veil of dictatorship and then suddenly appears on a big stage."

To conclude, Iran stands out in the Middle East with a rich history of women's movements that have evolved authentically from secular feminism to Islamic feminism and, more recently, cyberfeminism. The Iranian interpretation of cyberfeminism deviates from Western norms, representing a symbolic demand for freedom from compulsory hijab and an assertion of women's equality under Islamic dictatorial rule. The future trajectory of cyberfeminism in Iran and its potential impact remain contingent upon ongoing developments and the dynamic socio-political landscape.