

The role of social media in Iran: Finding community through the death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini

by Emmy Jean Marks

The rise of social media has created a new form of activism whereby individuals can connect globally to stand against oppression. Social media has provided a platform for people to share their opinions on important issues and raise awareness. The modern generation has a unique reliance on technology and have found ways to use content as a tool. Social media account holders are able to influence and create action. This virtual globalization allows for new ideas and thoughts to be broadcasted freely and enables individuals to find their respective groups online. It has also created a sense of community and belonging for people who may not have had access to such support in the past. As a society, we are aware of the negative downsides of social media and its effect on the confidence and status of individuals. The case study I will explore in further detail is that of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini, also known as Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom movement. I will analyze the influence of social media following her death and the geo-political context that explains the current polarization in Iran. Exploring the effects of social media in Iran through the Amini case can provide greater insight into how a community is built and maintained during a tragedy.

History of Modern Iran and Women's Status

The history of modern Iran is especially salient to this movement as the political background serves as the primary factor for political upheaval. While Iran is predominantly a Muslim country, with 90-95% of the population identifying as Muslim according to a 2020 study conducted by the U.S. Department of State, there is growing discontent with the current influence of the Islamic State over women's bodies (United States Department of State 2021). It is essential to provide historical context to understand the work of the women's movement and its influence in Iran. The 1970s were a particularly significant period, as Iran underwent a revolution that led to the fall of the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Abbas 2017: 703). The political landscape was

fueled by rising dissent against the power of the Shah (Abbas 2017: 704). The new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had previously been exiled, began his reign as Iran's supreme leader until his death. Under his rule, women's rights were heavily restricted, requiring the veil as a form of dress and other traditional values that were restrictive to the citizens (Fischer 2003: 272). This period led to growing discontent among women in Iran, who have been fighting for greater rights and freedoms. During the period of Khomeini's rule, his insistence on solidifying the influence of Islam led to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Oslanloo 2009: 32). Women's bodies were used as political tools to rehabilitate society back into order and to create an idealized version of a respectable Muslim family (Oslanloo 2009: 33). Women's bodies underwent "instituted measures that greatly diminished [their] legal status and social positions," contributing to their devaluation in society (Moghadam 2002: 1137). Throughout this period, women had significantly less autonomy

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over their bodies, not only through the process of veiling but through the ban on contraception and family planning (Moghadam 2002: 1138).

Women were then subject to the forces of male domination and were continuously used by men as political tools to reinforce patriarchal ideals. During this era, the need for feminism was growing as women were continuously pushed to the edge of society and undervalued for their contributions to both family and public life. After the death of Khomeini, the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran continued within Iran as leadership changed among various presidents, from Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani to Mohammad Khatami-Ardakani. After the presidency of Khatami-Ardakani, a new president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected with a call to return back to the previous ideologies of 1979 Iran. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the next leader of Iran was Hassan Rouhani, followed by the current leader Ebrahim Raisi. The leadership of Iran provides context for their current stance on gender rights and the conflict that has arisen as a result of the dichotomy between male domination and female submission. Despite these challenges, the Women, Life, Freedom movement has persisted, showcasing a deep political disdain for current affairs. The movement seeks to strike a balance between religion and women's rights, and has gained significant traction in the media and within the country. The women's movement in Iran has to navigate the influence of deeply ingrained systems of patriarchy that are rooted in their political system. It is important to understand the complexities of the situation to appreciate the work of the women's movement and their ongoing struggle for equality in Iran.

Background on Zhina (Mahsa) Amini

On September 13, 2022, a young woman named Zhina (Mahsa Amini) was attacked by Iran's

morality police. The attack was brought upon Amini because she was allegedly not wearing a hijab, which is contradictory to the mandatory veiling policy (McGrath 2022). Amini was a young woman only 22 years old who fell victim to police brutality (McGrath 2022). The details around her death are unclear as the Iranian government claims she died as a result of a heart attack, whereas eyewitness testimonies suggest that she was severely beaten by the morality police (McGrath 2022). Although the details of her death remain suspicious, conspiracies against the Iranian government have increased as citizens believe the morality police were to blame. Forced veiling has been instituted in Iranian law since 1979 with the morality police at the center, formerly known as the Gasht-e Ershad or guidance patrol (Al Jazeera 2022).

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini's death sparked large protests and outrage against the Islamic Republic of Iran and gained international support through social media. A website was started in honor of Zhina Amini to stand together in solidarity with Iranian women in the fight for human rights (Vital Voices and For Freedoms 2023). The website takes a stance against the Islamic Republic of Iran, stating that "women must comply with the Islamic Republic's mandatory hijab laws from the onset of puberty, and they are unequal in matters of marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance and more" (Vital Voices and For Freedoms 2023). This form of digital activism is used to bridge the international communities together to stand with Iran, as the website aims to promote the removal of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women (Vital Voices and For Freedoms 2023). Currently, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds a seat on the commission on the status of women and ultimately has a stance on the activism and empowerment of women in the United Nations

(Vital Voices and For Freedoms 2023). Many key figures in the media have signed a letter to remove the IRI from the board, specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These political figures include Shirin Ebadi, Malala Yousafzai, Nazanin Boniadi and other Western politicians such as Jacinda Arden, Michelle Obama, and Hillary Clinton. Ultimately the protests have been enlightening for many people globally. Women across the globe have felt a connection to the discrimination that Amini faced as a result of her gender, a factor entirely out of her control. She has become the face of a revolution and will continue to inspire both Iranian women and women across the globe.

The Center versus Margin Discourse

The geopolitics of Iran are uniquely situated as the people on the margin live in disparity to the people at the center in Tehran. The concept of the center versus the margin is especially important in relation to the varied ethnic and racial groups that exist within Iran. The ethnic background of Amini was Kurdish and as such she was viewed as a lesser class individual who is situated on the margin (McGrath 2022). The Kurdish name of Amini is Zhina and her Kurdish name has begun to be popularized in the media. The linguistic importance of naming indexes and situates Amini as a Kurdish person, an identity that is directly linked to her attack. In modern day Iran the center of Tehran controls all the power, and under the current leader there is little respect given to the people who occupy the margins. This disrespect was not always seen in Iran, as Ayatollah Khomeini's rule "praised slum dwellers as strong and upright people who were superior to those who lived in palaces. Early after the revolution, poverty and living in slums was considered a badge of honor and this, in turn, encouraged more migration from rural Iran to

urban areas" (Ranjipour 2022). Historically, the margins of Iran were not always portrayed as lesser areas, and at one time there was great respect for its occupants. However, in the current day this same respect is not present as the government tries to strictly and rigidly control the country through the center.

The country of Iran is divided on various fronts through religious and ethnic grounds. Diving into the religious aspects of Islam, there is the issue between Shia and Sunni Muslims in this region. The government is controlled by a Shia majority, which is instituted as the official religion in practice (Fischer 2003: 143). However, a large majority of Iranians who live around the margins follow the Sunni sect of Islam (Fishcher 2003: 274). This instability of religious following is problematic to the rulers of Iran, as they seek to control the amount of Sunni followers in the region to maintain the dominance of Shia Islam. The concept of geopolitics in Iran becomes especially significant as they vie to maintain territorial integrity in the region. Territorial integrity relates to the ability of ethnic groups to defend their territories and fight for their land. The largest proportion of ethnic groups in Iran includes Persians and Kurdish people (Amanat 2017: 787). The smaller ethnic minorities of Iran include Gilakis, Mazandarani, Lurs, Tats, Talysh, and Baloch (Shaffer 2022). As each of these minority ethnic groups are situated around the margins, it is incredibly important for the center of Iran to have control over these regions and groups. The need to maintain territorial integrity is evidenced in the case of Amini, as people around Iran rallied together to protest the current powers situated within Tehran. As a result, ethnic groups came together to use their voices to fight back and push for a revolution. Due to the strong influence of Kurdish people in Iran, the Woman, Life, Freedom protests began in Türkiye (Rebrii and Ayo 2023).

The slogan was originally “chanted by Kurdish women on March 8, 2006, on the streets of Türkiye” during the protests against Daesh (Rebrii and Ayo 2023). The slogan also has origins in Syria, which showcases the global nature of the rally cry (Rebrii and Ayo 2023). That the protests started outside of the country demonstrates the strong ethnic connection between the Kurdish people, and their resiliency, as it translates between borders. There is a clear community aspect that is reverberated within the varied ethnic groups as the essence of the slogan captures the sentiment of the people.

The Impacts of Social Media

The effects of social media have been a unifying factor for the people of Iran as well as the international community who have followed the protests and political situation. The notion of gender politics and equality has been the prevailing ideology of the protests on behalf of Amini. Through social media, users have been able to find community as a result of numerous different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, and Twitter. Many famous influencers have spoken out about the injustices of the Amini case, and others have risen to popularity as key figures of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. A newly popular influencer named Shervin Hajipour went viral online for his song titled “Baraye,” inspired by Amini’s protests and death. The title “Baraye” represents a song for the people of Iran, as it signifies the various reasons for the song; examples include “For the smiling faces. For the students, for future” (Houghton 2022). Hajipour reviewed #mahsaamini on Twitter, where he was inspired by the resilience of the citizens of Iran. His famous song became an anthem for the Iranian people as it deeply touched and moved all those who viewed and streamed Baraye. The song broke various

streaming records as it was listened to over 40 million times in the first 48 hours of its release (Vivarelli 2023). Hajipour’s song gained international recognition, winning the Grammy award for the Best Song for Social Change. His effect on the world was propelled by the influence of social media as his original song was first published to the social media platform Instagram (Vivarelli 2023). The influence of algorithms within social media platforms allowed for Hajipour’s song to be shared millions of times, as individuals who were moved by his message could then share it to family or friends. Excerpts from the English translation of the song include “For the sake of the girl that wished she was a boy” and “For my sister, your sister, our sisters. For changing the eroded brains” (Houghton 2022). Each of these selected lyrics depicts the state of gender politics in Iran (Houghton 2022), as “the eroded brains” showcases the ingrained attitudes toward women, and the desire to be born a boy represents a cry for change (Houghton 2022). The song’s influence is no small feat, as it truly encompassed the hurt and struggle of the Iranian people and the world.

The Grammys were influential as the West stood with Iran during the awards ceremony. Baraye won the Best Song for Social Change, but Iranian personality and actress Golshifteh Farahani performed with a famous North American band, Coldplay. During the performance, the video clip of Baraye was played in the background, as a means not to silence his voice and give integrity to the moving performance. Golshifteh made a political stance with the type of dress she chose to wear, as she wore traditional Baloch clothing. Her stance to index and perform an identity that is ethically on the margin is evidenced by the Baloch clothing. Her choice to wear the clothes was a political

statement to showcase her position on the inequalities that are prevalent in Iran and stand in unity with minorities. Farahani is uniquely situated as she is an actress of the East with influence in the West; because of this, her social media directly connects both worlds. She is not the only Iranian actress with access to both Eastern and Western audiences, but her rising popularity situates her as a political actor in favor of ending gender discrimination in Iran. Famous figures such as Justin Bieber and Gal Gadot, who speak out against the oppression of women in the West, are all influential actors in the combat against gender politics. Moreover, there are social activists and Iranian thinkers who have leveraged their social media platforms to incite a reform for change in their followers.

An American-Iranian journalist who has become a key figure in the conversations around Iran and the Amini case is Masih Alinejad. In a Time Magazine interview where Alinejad discusses young women dying as a result of brutality, she states “Suddenly they became heroes. Why don’t people pay attention to women when they’re alive?” (Rajvanshi 2023). Alinejad is famous for speaking out against the Islamic Republic of Iran, as she has spoken out numerous times against the regime of women’s oppression. On her social media, she has become a founding member of building community through atrocities. She is well connected to women in Iran and utilized her large platform to share videos that were taken at the protests for Zhina (Rajvanshi 2023). Alinejad posts multiple videos and images and has said that “our videos are our guns,” stating that revealing the truth and seeking to expose central powers is as powerful as weapons (Alinejad 2023). Social media can be used tactically to reshape the narratives that are currently in place. As a result, social media becomes a prominent feature of social change as viewers and followers are able to gain a different

perspective, one that is not usually seen in traditional media. Social media is then leveraged to build a new form of community, one that is entirely digital and navigated through an online landscape. This form of bonding and community is important and significant to the people of Iran and to those outside of the country. Having the ability to get up to date information and to listen to authentic voices which are not censored by traditional media is a newfound feature of social media activism.

Through social media, Iranian protesters rallied together as they navigated the governmental control of the internet. The social media platform Instagram was the only platform to survive the government shutdowns (Kumar 2022). The government of Iran systematically shut down users’ access to Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp to slow the rallying of people and incite control and fear into their citizens (Kumar 2022). The remaining app, Instagram, prevailed as it allowed Iranian users to contact their fellow citizens and the globe. The influence of hashtags such as #mahsaAmini amassed a large number of posts and created a well-known tag for connection. The hashtag “was tweeted and retweeted more than 250 million times in Persian and more than 50 million times in English in the first month after her death”, showcasing the intensity of the movement and its vast influence (Amidi 2022). The state of Iran’s internet censorship should be critically evaluated as the country engages in new strategies to repress digital freedoms (Campbell 2023). The User Protection Bill entered the Iranian parliament in 2022 and represents a consolidation of further control, which “obligates international tech companies to designate a legal national representative to ensure compliance with local Iranian content laws” (Campbell 2023). As a result, the future of Iran and their digital space is

still up for debate as they navigate control and censorship through a digital landscape.

Navigating the Influence of Faith

The question that arises from this discussion on the oppressive and controlling nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran is that of faith. There is a question of whether Muslim followers can continue to follow the faith, even after the atrocities that have been committed on its behalf. I argue that of course, Muslims do not need to abandon their faith even if it is being leveraged for political gain. However, it is important to take into consideration the long history of nationalism that is prevalent in the Middle East (Zubaida 2012: 570). Yet the Muslim world does not exist as a monolithic entity that is bound by medieval thought and philosophy as it is propagated in Western media. As such, there are multiple Muslims and multiple different representations of what it means to be Muslim (Moosa 2003: 114). Followers of Islam are able to create new interpretations from the Quran through the concept of *ijtihad* (Moosa 2003: 117). Muslim people should not be viewed as people who are in need of saving or as non-agentive actors (Mahmood 2004: 15). Instead, gender rights can exist within the Muslim faith as the Sharia is not a codified piece of text which has to rule Arabia and the modern world. Instead, there can be many Islamic feminisms which can be utilized to include greater justice for Muslim women (Mir-Hosseini 2009: 78). Islamic feminism can be defined as a movement of women who “have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the Qur’an in their fight for women’s rights, especially for women’s access to education” (Moghadam 2002: 1147). Islamic feminist theorist Valentine Moghadam argues that in the case of Iran there needs to be

female judges; this shift on a judicial level will create a large change in the current political system (Moghadam 2002: 1161). Many theorists accept and encourage Islamic feminism within the Middle East and within the country of Iran. Those fighting for the Women, Life, Freedom movement are not all against the hijab but instead against the compulsory nature of the veil. Amini did not die in vain and her spirit will continue to inspire the next generation of leaders and activists. Social media and the ability to quickly pass information from person to person can aid in creating a new generation of Islamic feminists. There is hope for Islamic women in their ability to choose, whether that be through dress like the hijab, or employment, as it is the case of the position of a judge. Islamic feminists do not want to destroy the Islamic faith; instead, they want to bring more equality into their lives and to find freedom from traditionally repressive institutions.

Discussion

The resiliency of the Iranian people is reflected in their ability to fight for the futures of their women, their life, and their freedoms. Through the internet and social media, Iranians and the world have been able to find community in tragedy and to keep fighting in the face of oppression. The life of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini is not a forgotten one; instead, she has become a martyr for the movement, a position which she should not have had to take. The political landscape is the largest challenge to the youth who are advocating against the Islamic Republic of Iran. As the younger generation rallies together through protest and posts they face a large challenge of ingrained systems of power. The social media generation is a fascinating phenomenon that has emerged as a result of the rapid development of social media. This generation is exposed to a constant stream of

algorithmically generated posts and content that is specifically tailored to their interests and preferences. As a result, they are gaining more freedom and becoming more vocal about injustices in their lives. They are inspired to seek change through the content they consume and are motivated to fight against their oppressors. However, it is important to note that there are significant differences between the East and the West when it comes to the nuances found in social media feeds. Iranian change makers, for instance, are better able to inspire their audiences and themselves through direct action. This is because they have a deep understanding of the cultural and political landscape of their country, and are able to use this knowledge to create content that resonates with their audience. By doing so, they are able to spark change and make a real difference in their communities. By harnessing the power of social media and using it to speak out against injustice, this generation is making a real difference in the world. The question of social justice and ethics needs to be further addressed. By understanding the nuances of different cultures and social media platforms, change makers are better able to connect with their audiences and inspire real change.

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