



Feminism Movement as a Catalyst for Democratization in Iran 2022-2024

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Abstract

In this research analyzes how the women's movement in Iran between 2022 and 2024 served as a catalyst in the process towards democracy in the country. The beginning of the movement's revival began after the death of Mahsa Amini, which sparked massive protests led by women with the cry "Women, Life, Freedom." The movement not only calls for freedom of dress, but also fights for broader human rights, including the right to expression, political involvement, and legal justice. With a qualitative approach and using the theoretical frameworks of Islamic feminism and participatory democracy, the research assesses the various forms of resistance perpetrated by women, from street demonstrations to online campaigns and legal advocacy, as well as the repressive response of the Iranian government that includes detention, torture, and execution. This research also explores how religious understanding contributes to the sustainability of patriarchal domination and how Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud counter this with a more equitable and inclusive hermeneutic approach. In the context of state imposed repression, support from the international community, including Western countries and human rights institutions, strengthens the success of this movement as part of the global effort towards democracy and gender equality. The selection of the 2022–2024 period is based on the momentum of the women's movement resurgence following the death of Mahsa Amini, which marked a significant transformation in the trajectory of feminist struggles as a catalyst for democratization in Iran. The analysis shows that the feminism movement in Iran has been instrumental in driving significant socio political change and has created more opportunities for women to be involved in the public sphere. With the active involvement of women in fighting for their rights and freedoms, this movement shows that democracy cannot be realized without the presence of women as key actors in the process of change.

Keywords: *Feminism; Democratization; Iran; Women's Rights; Mahsa Amini*

Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women in Iran have faced various forms of legal and social discrimination legitimized by the theocratic system. Compulsory hijab provisions, restrictions on the right to education and work, and patriarchal dominance are the main elements of the oppression of Iranian women. This discrimination is reflected in regulations such as the mandatory hijab stipulated in Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code, the inheritance and testimony laws that value a woman's rights as half that of a man, and the 2022 case of Mahsa Amini, who died in the custody of the morality police for allegedly

violating dress code regulations (Wadud, 1999; Esfandiari, 2022; Mir-Hosseini, 2006). This condition creates social pressures that have accumulated over decades. When Mahsa Amini died on September 16, 2022 after being detained by the morality police for not wearing the hijab "appropriately", this event sparked a nationwide protest led by women. This movement became a symbol of resistance to state oppression, not only against dress codes, but against the authoritarian political system as a whole. Amini became a martyr of modern Iranian feminism and gave birth to the global slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" that marked the transformation of the women's movement into a political force.

The significance of this feminism movement is not only limited to the issue of gender equality, but extends to being a catalyst for the struggle towards democratization in Iran. In a society that has been repressed by religious political power for decades, women actually appear as the main agents of change. This marked a major shift in the pattern of resistance, where feminism was not only oriented towards women's rights, but also against structural political repression. According to Tohidi (2023), Iranian feminism has a long history of ups and downs due to political pressure, but post-2022 this movement has gained unprecedented cross-class and ethnic support. Through social media, protests spread quickly and built national and even international solidarity. Democratization is the main goal of the feminist movement in Iran because it aims to end religious political based structural repression and expand the space for inclusive civic participation, while the long history of Iranian feminism is triggered by the ongoing resistance to legal and social restrictions that has been going on since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This context makes the feminist movement a catalyst in the process towards participatory democracy and policy reform in Iran.

The problem that arises in this context is how the feminism movement can transform from a form of identity resistance to a political movement that effectively promotes democratization. The main question to be answered is: *What are the dynamics of the feminism movement in post 2022 Iran, and to what extent does it contribute to the democratization process in Iran?* In addition, it is important to examine how the movement's symbols, women's leadership, and cross group support are shaping a new direction in Iranian civil politics. This formulation is crucial because there have not been many researches that have specifically examined the intersection between contemporary feminism and political reform in Iran after 2022. This research tries to fill this gap with a descriptive qualitative approach based on literature studies. Its main focus is the interconnectedness between the structural pressures of the state, women's collective responses, and the emergence of new political consciousness.

Several previous studies have highlighted women's involvement in social movements in Iran, but not many have comprehensively examined the post-2022 movement as an initial process toward democratization. For example, Moghadam (2003) explains that women's movements in Iran are often fragmented due to state repression and cultural barriers. However, in the post-death context of Mahsa Amini, women's involvement is no longer symbolic, but substantive in shaping public opinion and political pressure. In addition, Esfandiari (2022) notes that this movement marks a paradigm shift from the demand for morality to the demand for systemic reform. Therefore, this research distinguishes itself by placing the feminist movement as the main subject in the context of changing the power structure in Iran. Thus, the approach used is more oriented towards political transformation than just social activism.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how the feminist movement triggered by the Mahsa Amini tragedy was able to develop into a socio political force that suppresses the Iranian theocratic regime. This research also aims to identify the characteristics of movements, strategies used, and their impact on policies and democratic spaces. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of global feminism and democratization in the Middle East region. Using the theoretical approach of social movements and democratization, this paper provides a mapping of the internal dynamics of the feminism movement in Iran. Finally, this research shows how women's struggles in Iran are not just a narrative of identity resistance, but as a transformative political initiative. The "Women, Life, Freedom" movement combining street demonstrations, cross class and cross ethnic digital campaigns, and legal advocacy grounded in Islamic feminism acts as a catalyst for democratization in

Iran by simultaneously challenging the state's patriarchal structure, expanding citizens' political participation, and affirming human rights as the foundation of regime legitimacy. This movement is the catalyst to democracy based on gender justice and civil rights.

Theory

Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism serves as a contextual and progressive approach in analyzing gender justice within Islamic societies. Central to this theory is Amina Wadud, who asserts that many Quranic interpretations are inherently patriarchal due to the male dominated tradition of exegesis. Through her hermeneutical framework in *Qur'an and Woman*, Wadud (1999) emphasizes the principle of tawhid the unity of God as a theological basis for gender equality, arguing that all individuals are equal before God regardless of gender. This approach rejects oppressive interpretations of Islamic law while reaffirming the validity of the Qur'an as a source of justice. Wadud encourages a rereading of verses in light of their socio-historical context to prevent literal interpretations that marginalize women. Her thought is essential in understanding the Iranian women's movement, which utilizes Islamic discourse as a means of resistance rather than adopting Western feminist paradigms (Wadud, 1999).

Complementing Wadud perspective, Ziba Mir-Hosseini offers a legal-anthropological approach by arguing that gender inequality in Islamic societies arises not from Islam itself, but from the patriarchal interpretations institutionalized in family and legal codes. She highlights the importance of separating the divine from the historically constructed interpretations of Islamic law (*fiqh*) that often limit women's rights (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Her emphasis on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) opens pathways for reform within Islamic jurisprudence, especially concerning issues like divorce, inheritance, and public participation. In the context of Iran, this perspective allows feminist actors to challenge state policies using religious legitimacy. Together, Wadud and Mir-Hosseini's frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of Islamic feminism that is not only faith affirming but also politically liberating. These ideas form the theoretical basis for examining how the Iranian feminist movement navigates authoritarian religious structures.

Therefore, Islamic feminism, as framed by Wadud and Mir-Hosseini, becomes more than a theoretical stance it is a transformative methodology that integrates spiritual authenticity with gender justice. This framework enables Iranian women to reclaim religious texts and reinterpret their roles within society through a lens that aligns with both faith and freedom. It also allows scholars to analyze feminist movements in Islamic contexts without defaulting to secular or Western models. In the current research, Islamic feminism is applied to assess the strategies, symbols, and collective consciousness that define women's resistance in Iran post 2022. By focusing on endogenous tools of critique rooted in Islamic thought, this theory legitimizes gender discourse within a conservative socio political environment. It thus provides an essential analytical lens for understanding how democratization can be driven from within religious traditions rather than against them.

Concept

Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy is a form of democracy that emphasizes the active involvement of citizens in the political decision making process, not just limited to elections. This concept emphasizes the importance of the direct participation of the community in the political process as a way to strengthen the legitimacy of public policies and expand the space for citizen representation. According to Barber (1984), participatory democracy requires not only the right to vote, but also an active role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. This is in line with the view of Pateman (1970) who emphasized the importance of political learning through direct involvement in democratic practice.

Therefore, meaningful political participation requires supportive social and institutional conditions, such as access to information, public discussion spaces, and inclusive participatory mechanisms.

In practice, participatory democracy is not just a normative term, but also a means to improve the quality of true democracy. This kind of participation can be actualized through various ways such as citizens meetings, deliberations to plan development, and supervision of public policies. Effective participation requires the conscious and critical involvement of communities that are able to represent their common interests (Fung & Wright, 2003). It also demands trust between the people and the government as well as transparency in the decision making process. Thus, participatory democracy is more than just the sum of public involvement, it also includes the quality and impact of public policy processes and outcomes. In this research, the author will use the concept of participatory democracy to help analyze the feminism movement as a catalyst in the democratization process in Iran in the period 2022–2024, as raised in the focus of this research.

Reinterpreting Faith, Reclaiming Rights: Amina Wadud Feminism and the Democratization Movement in Iran

Amina Wadud theory of Islamic feminism offers a transformative lens by advocating for gender justice through a re-interpretation of Islamic sacred texts from a female perspective. Her hermeneutical approach emphasizes the principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), which she argues necessitates the equal value of men and women before God, thus challenging patriarchal interpretations traditionally upheld by male religious authorities (Wadud, 1999). In the Iranian context, where theocratic structures use religious narratives to justify discriminatory laws against women, Wadud framework serves as a theological foundation for Muslim women to claim civil and political rights without compromising their religious identity. Her approach does not seek to reject Islam but rather to critique and reform its patriarchal misinterpretations to align with the principles of justice inherent in the faith.

The feminist movement in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 exemplifies the practical application of Islamic feminism in a socio political context. The movement articulated through the slogan “Women, Life, Freedom” transcends demands for bodily autonomy, evolving into a platform for broader democratization driven by female agency. As Shirazi (2021) notes, this movement represents an epistemological resistance against conservative religious narratives, aligning with Wadud call for an inclusive and contextual reading of the Qur’an. Iranian women have thus become political subjects, mobilizing within the framework of faith to challenge authoritarian and patriarchal state structures. Consequently, the feminist uprising between 2022 and 2024 reveals a profound intersection between Islamic feminism and participatory democracy, affirming that religiously grounded feminist thought can act as a legitimate and powerful catalyst for political transformation in Islamic societies.

Reclaiming Citizenship: Feminist Political Participation in Iran through the Framework of Pateman’s Concept of Participatory Democracy

Carole Pateman concept of participatory democracy emphasizes the direct involvement of citizens in decision making processes, arguing that democracy must extend beyond electoral procedures to include continuous and meaningful civic engagement (Pateman, 1970). This concept promotes an egalitarian political culture where individuals are empowered through active participation, which also serves as a form of political education. In the context of Iran’s 2022–2024 feminist movement, this model becomes especially relevant. The widespread protests following the death of Mahsa Amini demonstrated how Iranian women transitioned from passive subjects within a theocratic regime to active political agents advocating for democratic change. By asserting their rights in public spaces, online platforms, and grassroots campaigns, these women embodied the essence of participatory democracy, transforming resistance into a collective demand for systemic reform.

The Iranian feminist movement aligns with Pateman framework by showcasing how marginalized groups can generate political consciousness and challenge authoritarian governance through direct engagement. The movement’s emphasis on civil disobedience, community organizing, and symbolic

protest reflects a democratization process rooted in grassroots participation rather than elite-driven reform. As Fung and Wright (2003) argue, participatory democracy is strengthened when citizens develop the capacity to deliberate and influence institutions a dynamic clearly seen in how Iranian women leveraged social media, international advocacy, and inter-ethnic solidarity to assert their rights. Therefore, the feminist movement in Iran is not merely a gendered struggle; it is a participatory democratic endeavor that seeks to reshape the public sphere and redefine citizenship in a highly restricted sociopolitical environment.

Methodology

This research will use a qualitative research method with a type of descriptive analysis research. John W. Creswell explained that qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or humanitarian issue (Creswell, 2016). This research will analyze and describe the development of the feminism movement in Iran in the period 2022 to 2024, focusing on how women's struggles can serve as a driving force in the democratization process. The data to be collected will include public statements, narratives of activism, and collective actions of the movement's actors, which will be thoroughly analyzed from socio-political and religious perspectives. Through this approach, it is hoped that a deep understanding of the contribution of the Islamic feminism movement in Iran can be obtained to democratic changes in the repressive political system.

Iran's Social and Political Dynamics as a Catalyst for Democratization 2022-2024 in the Perspective of Participatory Democracy and Islamic Feminism

The period between 2022 and 2024 in Iran is characterized by major social and political changes, triggered by massive women led demonstrations following the death of Mahsa Amini in moral police custody in September 2022. This movement became an important moment in the resistance against the regime that was considered to oppress civil rights and women's freedoms. Public involvement in protests shows a form of democracy that involves active participation, where people directly demand changes to the power structure that is considered patriarchal and non-transparent. In this situation, the narrative of Islamic feminism emerged as a cultural and political approach to undermine the dominance of conservative religious interpretations of women. This view does not refute Islam, but calls for a fairer interpretation of the role and position of women in Iranian society (Moghadam, 2023).

Islamic feminism in Iran serves not only as a means of resistance, but also as a form of cultural expression that tries to reconcile the values of gender justice with the principles of faith. The movement emerged from the grassroots, with the active participation of women in various public spaces, education, social media platforms, and government agencies, even as they faced severe political challenges. In the context of participatory democracy, women's participation in protests against the regime represents a shift from symbolic resistance to more systemic forms of resistance. This shows that women are no longer just objects of moral arrangements, but have been transformed into conscious and planned political subjects (Kian-Thiébaud, 2022). This process highlights that social change in Iran is inseparable from women's role as agents of change.

The government's repressive measures, such as restricting internet access and arresting activists, have not been able to dampen the collective voices of Iranian women who have been organized through social channels and digital communities. The use of communication technology serves as a strategic tool to design actions and spread narratives of struggle, thereby strengthening solidarity among various classes and regions. In this context, democracy that involves participation is not limited to participation in elections, but also includes direct involvement in the political process through demonstrations, the drafting of discourses, and the negotiation of social meaning. The rejection of state symbols that represent patriarchal power, such as the mandatory wearing of the hijab, reflects a form of symbolic struggle aimed at driving a change in the meaning of Iranian national identity (Bayat, 2022). This signifies the unity of cultural and political struggles within the framework of Islamic feminism.

In contemporary political developments, the state responds with an increasingly conservative approach to coercive approaches and legislation, but these efforts do not necessarily stop the participatory dynamics of the people. There are tensions between the state and civil society which shows a crisis of political legitimacy, especially in the representation of women in state institutions. The Iranian regime tends to maintain a centralistic power structure dominated by religious and military elites, thus shrinking the space for public deliberation. Islamic feminism, in this case, offers ideological and methodological alternatives that emphasize the importance of inclusivity, justice, and the progressive reinterpretation of religious values (Shirazi, 2021). This shows that political reform in Iran is not enough with structural changes alone, but also an epistemic revolution in understanding gender and power relations.

Women led social movements in Iran between 2022 and 2024 demonstrate the transformative potential of participatory democracy based on local values and faith. Although the challenges faced are considerable, such as state repression and social polarization, the collective spirit of society shows that social change cannot be stopped by repressive power. Women's involvement in public discourse and decision making is an important foundation for the formation of an equal and democratic civil society. In this context, Islamic feminism acts as a bridge between modernity and tradition, between human rights and spirituality, which is the basis for sustainable social movements. Thus, Iran's current socio political dynamics reflect the struggle between structural conservatism and women driven participatory progressivism (Afshar, 2023).

The Form and Strategy of the Feminism Movement in Iran

The feminism movement in Iran developed under complex socio political conditions, characterized by state pressure and a deep-rooted patriarchal culture. Despite this, Iranian women have managed to develop adaptive forms of resistance, including through art, social media, and limited political participation. This movement is not only a struggle for gender equality, but also a form of resistance against state domination that curbs women's civil rights (Bayat, 2013). Over time, Iranian feminism has shown a unique dynamic, where activism does not always manifest itself in the form of massive demonstrations, but rather through everyday actions that are symbolic and subversive to the prevailing norms (Milani, 2011).

One of the main strategies of Iranian feminism is the use of digital spaces as an arena of expression and advocacy. As internet access increases, Iranian women are using social media such as Instagram and Telegram to voice injustice and build collective solidarity. This platform allowed the birth of online campaigns such as "My Stealthy Freedom" that encouraged women to symbolically reject the strict dress code by removing their hijab in public places (Moaveni, 2019). The campaign highlights how this new form of resistance is not only effective in reaching a global audience, but also relatively safe because it does not directly challenge state apparatus in the public sphere.

In addition to the digital space, the feminist movement in Iran also strategies through cultural production, such as film, literature, and visual arts, as a medium for conveying social criticism. The works of women artists often raise the issue of gender discrimination and inequality of rights in the family and society. This strategy utilizes symbolism and allegorical narratives to avoid direct censorship by the state. For example, Iranian women filmmakers have successfully used visual metaphors to convey feminist messages within the limits set by the state (Milani, 2011). This shows that feminism in Iran is capable of transforming in a flexible, intelligent, and contextual form.

The feminism movement also took the form of legal advocacy, although its space for movement was very limited. Women who work as lawyers and legal activists fight for reforms against family law, inheritance rights, and discriminatory criminal laws. They often work in the shadow of the threat of detention or revocation of legal practice permits, but still fight for change from within the system (Moaveni, 2019). This legalistic approach reflects a strategy of "resistance from within", which differs from feminist movements in other countries that tend to be frontal towards the state.

The forms and strategies of feminism in Iran are also intersectional, encompassing the experiences of women of different social classes and ethnicities. Kurdish, Baluchi, and other minority women have also voiced the injustices they experience, expanding the scope of the movement to be more inclusive. In this regard, Iranian feminism is not only about gender, but also closely related to other structural issues such as religious freedom, minority rights, and identity expression (Bayat, 2013). This inclusive movement strategy strengthens women's position in demanding justice in various aspects of socio-political life in Iran.

The Iranian Government's Response to the Feminism Movement in the Perspective of Islamic Feminism

The Iranian government responded to the feminism movement with a complex and cautious approach, given the country's ideological underpinnings that relied heavily on Shia Islamic teachings. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran actively established a legal and social system based on a conservative interpretation of Islam. The feminism movement is seen as a threat to traditional values and patriarchal structures legitimized by religion. Therefore, the government's response is more inclined towards restricting the movement space of women activists and rejection of Western feminist agendas. The feminism movement was seen as incompatible with local cultural and religious values.

In the perspective of Islamic feminism, this response does not completely reject gender equality, but rather tries to adapt it within the framework of sharia. The Iranian government promotes the role of women as "mothers" and "educators of the nation," emphasizing the importance of women's honor and dignity according to Islamic teachings. However, this is often used as an excuse to limit women's participation in public spaces. Several policies such as gender segregation in public spaces and restrictions on women's clothing are justified as protection of public morality. This view has drawn criticism from Islamic feminists who emphasize that Islamic teachings do not contradict gender equality if interpreted progressively (Badran, 2009).

Islamic feminism in Iran seeks to create a counter discourse that combines Islamic social justice values with the principles of women's emancipation. Islamic feminist activists emphasize the importance of reinterpreting religious texts with a contextual hermeneutic approach. They criticize the literal and patriarchal interpretations that have dominated gender discourse in Iran. Despite facing political and social pressure, Islamic feminists in Iran have managed to leverage cultural spaces such as media, education, and religious discussions to voice women's rights. This effort became a legitimate and religious form of resistance to the patriarchal power structure (Mir- Hosseini, 2006).

The government's repressive response to feminism is often manifested through legal policies and coercive measures. Family law in Iran is one of the main instruments that reflects gender inequality, such as in terms of divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The government also imposed censorship on works deemed to spread feminist ideas that were contrary to Islamic values. Activists who advocate for women's rights are often criminalized under the pretext of threatening national security or spreading Western propaganda. Nevertheless, there is a dynamic of resistance among women who continue to fight for the space of expression in the midst of these limitations.

The Iranian government's response to the feminist movement shows an ambivalence between the desire to maintain an authentic Islamic identity and the demand for social change from within society. Islamic feminism emerged as a middle ground that allowed the struggle for women's rights to take place within the boundaries considered legitimate by the state. The movement challenged the dominance of conservative religious interpretations while maintaining its religious legitimacy. In this context, Islamic feminism in Iran has not only become a social movement, but also an epistemological battleground over the meaning of gender justice in Islam (Wadud, 2006).

International Support and Reaction to the Feminism Movement in Iran in the Perspective of Islamic Feminism and Participatory Democracy

The feminism movement in Iran cannot be separated from the international community's spotlight, especially after the events of Mahsa Amini's death that sparked a wave of national and global protests. The international community, including Western countries and human rights institutions, has provided moral support to women activists demanding civil rights and freedom of dress. This phenomenon shows the existence of global solidarity based on universal human rights values, despite Iran's unique cultural and religious context. From the perspective of Islamic feminism, this solidarity requires caution so as not to ignore local norms that are still the social reference of society (Badran, 2009). Meanwhile, from the perspective of participatory democracy, this movement is a strong indication of the emergence of women's political consciousness in the public space that has been closed.

The international reaction does not stop at moral support, but is also manifested through sanctions policies aimed at state officials or institutions involved in the repression of protesters. Countries such as the United States, Canada and Britain have imposed sanctions on Iranian officials, as well as calling on global institutions such as the United Nations (UN) to exert further diplomatic pressure. Within the framework of Islamic feminism, such interventions are often debated because they can lead to the politicization of women's struggles and the obscuration of authentic voices from local activists (Moghadam, 2002). Participatory democracy demands that social change must come from the internal participation of the community, not just the result of external pressures. Therefore, it is important to prioritize women's empowerment from within the social system in which they live, not replacing it with foreign norms.

Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also play a strategic role in shaping global public opinion. They documented violations, disseminated information digitally, and exerted moral pressure on the Iranian government. This role can be seen as an effective form of transnational advocacy while respecting the local values carried out by the Islamic feminism movement (Badran, 2009). The support of the Iranian diaspora abroad also adds to the symbolic and political power of this movement, especially since they have wider access to international media. In the context of participatory democracy, synergy between local and global actors is essential for political transformation in Iran to remain based on the involvement of domestic civil society.

Even so, support from abroad has also raised resistance from Iran's political and religious elite. They view international intervention and criticism as a form of threat to national sovereignty and the country's Islamic identity. This tension reflects the classic dilemma between human rights universalism and cultural particularism, which is also a subject of debate in Islamic feminism (Moghadam, 2002). An effective women's movement is one that is able to dialogue with local values, not one that is crude copying the model of the Western feminist movement. Participatory democracy also requires that sustainable socio-political change is only possible if people feel part of the process itself, not feel forced from the outside.

Overall, the international reaction and support for the feminism movement in Iran shows the complexity of the relationship between global solidarity and local realities. Islamic feminism is an epistemological alternative to fight for gender justice without stripping away the religious identity of Muslim women. Meanwhile, participatory democracy provides a framework for understanding how Iranian women actively contribute to shaping the direction of political change in their country (Wright, 2023). Therefore, collaboration between local and international actors needs to be built on an equal footing and oriented towards context-based emancipation. It is important that the feminism movement in Iran is not trapped in a dichotomy between internal oppression and external intervention, but rather becomes an authentic and sustainable transformative movement.

The Implications of the Feminism Movement on Democracy in Iran in the Perspective of Participatory Democracy

The feminism movement in Iran shows the dynamics of resistance to patriarchal political and cultural structures that have long taken root. Despite the dominating authoritarian regime, Iranian women continue to fight for a more inclusive space for political, legal, and social participation. In the perspective of participatory democracy, this movement reflects the aspirations of civil society who want active involvement in political decision making. Democracy is not just an electoral procedure, but the direct involvement of citizens, including women, in political life (Pateman, 1970). Therefore, Iranian feminism has become an important motor in demanding a more egalitarian political transformation.

Iran's feminist struggle, as seen in the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement after the death of Mahsa Amini, is a form of criticism of the lack of women's freedom and rights in the public sphere. Women's participation in these protests not only shows courage, but also challenges the legitimacy of a system that ignores participatory democratic principles. In this context, feminism is not only a movement for gender equality, but also a tool for political and social liberation as a whole. Women's activism opens up a new discourse on the role of citizens in democratic systems, which were previously dominated by elites and state institutions (Moghadam, 2002). This marks a paradigm shift towards a broader and substantial participatory democracy.

Iran's feminist movement highlights the importance of the right to a body, expression, and political participation as an indicator of a healthy democracy. A state that restricts women's control over their bodies, as is the case in the policy of the mandatory hijab, hurts the principles of individual freedom in participatory democracies. Iranian women's resistance to this kind of regulation reflects a *bottom-up* form of democratization, which relies on the political consciousness of the people to create change. Participatory democracy demands an equal deliberative space between citizens, which unfortunately is not available in Iran's repressive political system (Held, 2006). Thus, this movement demands a more democratic reconstruction of the political order.

Within the framework of participatory democracy, feminism also functions as a form of political education that develops the critical consciousness of society. The actions of Iranian women create new spaces for discussion that challenge conservative values and invite collective participation across genders and generations. This process strengthens the capacity of civil society to demand accountability and transparency from the government. When women demand their basic rights, they also encourage the institutionalization of democratic values in the practice of national and state life. The feminist movement, therefore, not only carries a gender agenda, but also democracy rooted in people's life experiences.

Finally, the feminism movement in Iran expanded the definition of democracy to include not limited to elections, but also to include social justice, gender equality, and freedom of speech. Iranian women's struggles challenge the dualism between private and public spaces, and dismantle patriarchal constructions within the state. Participatory democracy, in this context, provides an analytical framework capable of explaining how political transformation occurs through women's agency. Despite being faced with repression, this movement shows that citizens' political participation can still grow from marginalized spaces. Therefore, Iranian feminism has become a symbol of resistance as well as hope for a more inclusive and substantial democracy.

Feminism Movement as a Catalyst for Democratization in Iran 2022-2024

The feminist movement in Iran from 2022 to 2024, triggered by the tragic death of Mahsa Amini, marks a critical turning point in the country's socio political landscape. The mobilization of women under the slogan "*Woman, Life, Freedom*" rapidly evolved beyond gender specific demands into a broader struggle for democratization. This movement signaled a significant shift wherein Iranian women no longer functioned solely as victims of state repression but emerged as active agents of political change. Their sustained presence in public protests, legal advocacy, and digital resistance exemplifies how

feminist activism can catalyze the democratization process by reclaiming civic spaces and challenging authoritarian norms that have long excluded women from political participation.

Through this movement, Iranian women effectively confronted the intersection of patriarchy and authoritarianism by asserting their right to visibility, voice, and agency. The protests demonstrated elements of participatory democracy, as outlined by Pateman (1970), where the grassroots mobilization of marginalized citizens becomes a vehicle for political transformation. Feminist actors utilized both online and offline strategies, building solidarity across ethnic and class divides, and framing their struggle within both human rights and Islamic justice paradigms. This dual framing enabled the movement to garner both local legitimacy and international solidarity, strengthening its role as a transformative force in Iran's contested political environment.

Furthermore, the feminist movement's ability to pressure the state, attract global attention, and introduce new discourses on rights and citizenship indicates its catalytic role in democratization. It reshaped the relationship between citizens and the state by demanding transparency, accountability, and inclusivity values central to any democratic system. The consistent and strategic activism by women activists has laid the foundation for a reimagined civil society in Iran, where feminist values are no longer peripheral but central to democratic aspirations. Thus, the 2022–2024 feminist uprising not only responded to immediate injustices but also redefined the terms of political engagement in Iran, positioning women as pivotal actors in the country's democratic trajectory.

The evolution of the feminist movement in Iran post-2022 reflects a strategic convergence between gender-based resistance and democratic aspirations. The movement's demands have transcended traditional feminist concerns and now embody broader civil liberties such as freedom of expression, political representation, and judicial accountability. Scholars argue that the democratizing impulse of the movement lies in its grassroots character, which fosters horizontal leadership and collective action among diverse social groups (Chehabi, 2023). This inclusiveness challenges Iran's vertical and centralized political power, creating informal political arenas where citizens engage in deliberation and dissent. As such, feminism in Iran not only confronts patriarchy but also delegitimizes authoritarian governance by mobilizing new forms of civic engagement (Azadeh, 2023).

Furthermore, the strategic use of digital platforms has enabled Iranian feminists to bypass state censorship and construct a transnational discourse of rights and justice. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have become tools for real-time documentation of abuses, community mobilization, and alliance-building across ideological and ethnic lines. These technological tools have helped transform the feminist movement into a sustained civic campaign that exerts pressure both internally and externally (Dehghanpisheh, 2023). The resonance of the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" across global protests illustrates the ability of localized struggles to inspire democratic consciousness on an international scale. In this context, the feminist movement demonstrates the characteristics of a digital participatory democracy adaptive, networked, and resistant to authoritarian disruption (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2023).

The feminist uprising also redefined the symbolic and practical boundaries of citizenship in Iran by asserting women's right to occupy public and political spaces. The act of unveiling, for instance, became not only a personal gesture but also a collective political performance aimed at reclaiming bodily autonomy and agency. Through such performative resistance, Iranian women demand recognition as full political actors rather than passive subjects of theocratic control. This shift signals a reconfiguration of political identity in Iran, where women no longer accept the dichotomy between religiosity and rights-based citizenship. By integrating Islamic reinterpretation with democratic ideals, the feminist movement contributes to a hybrid political vision that contests both domestic authoritarianism and reductive external narratives (Chehabi, 2023; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2023). Hence, this movement lays the groundwork for a participatory and pluralistic society rooted in indigenous values and universal freedoms.

Conclusion

The findings of this research show that the feminist movement in Iran between 2022 and 2024, ignited by the death of Mahsa Amini, has evolved into a powerful sociopolitical force advocating for democratization. Far beyond demanding gender based reforms, the movement embodied broader civic aspirations such as freedom of expression, bodily autonomy, and participatory governance. The data reveals that actions like the “Women, Life, Freedom” protests, the digital campaign “My Stealthy Freedom,” and grassroots mobilization through symbolic and cultural resistance have succeeded in uniting women across ethnic, religious, and class lines to challenge the patriarchal and authoritarian structure of the Iranian state.

This research confirms that Iranian feminism has transformed from identity based resistance into an organized political movement with democratic goals. The question of how feminism has served as a catalyst for democratization is answered by examining its multidimensional strategies ranging from street demonstrations to legal advocacy, reinterpretation of Islamic texts, and networked digital activism. Women, especially from minority groups, have become active political agents who reclaim their visibility and agency in both private and public spheres. The use of participatory democracy theory also highlights how women’s involvement is not symbolic, but reflects a conscious effort to shape inclusive governance structures despite state repression.

The implications of these findings point to the transformative capacity of Islamic feminism as both a theological and political tool. Through the reinterpretation of sacred texts, as proposed by thinkers like Amina Wadud and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Iranian feminists have successfully framed their movement as both religiously legitimate and socially progressive. This intersectional and culturally embedded approach allows the movement to avoid the binary trap between secular Western feminism and conservative state Islamism. In turn, this provides an epistemological foundation for bottom up democratization that challenges hegemonic power while preserving faith based identity. The integration of Islamic justice narratives with universal human rights principles positions the movement as a unique model of culturally grounded democratic transformation.

Based on these results, several recommendations can be made for future research. First, there is a need to examine the long term institutional impacts of the feminist movement on Iranian legal frameworks, particularly in relation to family law and women's political representation. Second, the role of the Iranian diaspora and transnational digital activism in amplifying domestic struggles deserves more attention, especially in terms of framing, lobbying, and media influence. Third, comparative studies involving other Middle Eastern or Muslim majority countries can provide a broader understanding of how participatory democracy and Islamic feminism intersect in authoritarian contexts. Lastly, it is important to investigate how the political education facilitated by women led activism contributes to sustainable civic engagement and democratization.

In conclusion, the Iranian feminist movement between 2022 and 2024 exemplifies how marginalized actors can transform sociopolitical structures through participatory and context based resistance. Drawing on both local Islamic values and global democratic norms, Iranian women have mobilized effectively across physical and digital spaces to confront state oppression and demand inclusive governance. Their activism has redefined citizenship, contested patriarchal interpretations of religion, and expanded public deliberation in a closed political system. This movement, while still facing repression, signifies an emergent democratic consciousness that centers women as key agents of political change. Therefore, feminism in Iran is not merely a gendered discourse it is a driving force toward a pluralistic and democratic future.

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