

## Woman, Life, Freedom: On Protests in Iran and Why It Is a Feminist Movement

By Tara Mehrabi

*Dr. / senior lecturer in Gender Studies at Karlstad University*

September 16, 2022 marks the tragic death of Mahsa Zhina Amini, a 22-year-old woman who was killed while in the custody of the Iranian morality police. Mahsa Zhina's death ignited a series of anti-regime protests across cities in Iran, which are still raging as I write this essay on 28 November. While these are not the first large-scale anti-regime protests in Iran (examples include Kuye Daneshgah in 1999 and the Green Movement protests in 2009–2010), there are certain differences.<sup>1</sup> Mostly, what makes these protests powerful and unique is the overarching presence of women, and at the same time, women's issues and rights being placed at the center of the protests. As represented by the main slogan of the movement, "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" (in Kurdish "Zin, Ziyar, Azadi," that is, "Woman, Life, Freedom"), the protests are indeed a feminist movement, or, as circulated on social media, a feminist revolution.

In this essay, I draw on the lyrics of a viral song by Shervin Hajipour titled "Baraye" (meaning: for the sake of). The song was released on 28 September and immediately became the anthem of the protest, leading to the arrest of the singer the following day. The song offers snippets of the multilayered grounds of the protests, connected

to the politics of gender, life, and sexuality. Shervin refers to certain national tragedies and struggles, such as economic corruption, poverty, child labor, gender discrimination, environmental degradation, species extinction and the downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane in 2020 by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In three sections of this essay, I connect excerpts of the lyrics to the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" and the symbolic act of cutting one's hair that has come to represent the protests. In the first sections on *woman*, I reflect on the regime's gender politics (of hair), arguing that the act of cutting one's hair becomes a symbolic act of resisting such gender politics. In the second section on *life*, I focus on the act of cutting hair as a mode of mourning the unjust and untimely deaths, for which accountability is demanded. In the last section on *freedom*, I focus on the sexual politics of hair and the politics of the veil.<sup>2</sup> I argue that cutting one's hair publicly can be understood as a symbolic act of resisting modes of sexualization that are used by the regime to justify mandatory hijab. Putting together the three parts – woman, life, freedom – I conclude that cutting one's hair publicly in this context becomes a feminist act of resistance, an exercise of agency

through which Iranian women are taking control and reclaiming their womanhood, their lives, their bodies, and their freedom of choice.

## On Womanhood, Gender, and Hair

*For dancing freely in the streets ...  
For my sister, for your sister, for our sisters ...  
For the girl who wished to be a boy  
(From "Baraye," by Shervin Hajipour, my translation)*

As a young girl slowly becoming a teenager, I would, every now and then, see one of my classmates shave her head. If asked, they would say that it helped their hair become thicker and stronger and gain volume. They would grow the perfect hair and become beautiful women. I too had long hair, but I never shaved my head until I was half-way through high school. To the horror of school guardians and parents, it became trendy for girls to cut their hair very short in 'boyish' styles, or to shave it off completely. For my generation, it was a rebellious act against puberty, refusing to hand our changing bodies over to the nation, to submit and to lose our freedom of movement. To pass as a boy meant we could once again hang out in the streets of Tehran with our friends. We could run, ride a bike, and play football, all prohibited for our now sexualized bodies marked by gender. Had we kept our long hair, had we become the beautiful young women we once wanted to be, our thick hair would have tied us down. We cut our hair; we wished to be boys so we could dance freely in the streets again.

Having long hair is what makes a woman a 'real woman', as I was told many times growing up. Marked by cis-normative stereotypes of femininity and masculinity as 'radical opposites', hair is seen as a visible material marker of gender both before and after puberty. As such, women's hair is heavily guarded by cultural norms, religious doctrines, and policing practices in a paradoxical way. It must be long, voluminous, and wild, yet tamed and hidden carefully under the scarf. Poems are written about

hair, stories told, idioms made, and even religious doctrines circulated.

Visiting several online religious forums, Imams' websites, and online religious magazines in Farsi, I was not surprised to see young women posting questions about whether cutting their hair short or shaving their heads is frowned upon or forbidden for a Muslim woman (this was before the protests). While responses from the 'experts' would argue that it is not forbidden by Islam, they would suggest avoiding it unless necessary (for example for hygiene reasons, to give their hair a boost, or to allow them to be more attentive to household chores instead of wasting time caring for their long hair). However, should the purpose of cutting one's hair be to look like a man, it was unanimously prohibited because it crosses gender boundaries.

Long hair (and wearing hijab) makes segregation easier as gendered bodies are assumed to be easily spotted based on the length of the hair. Hence, their movement across space could be more easily restricted and controlled. Gender segregation in Iran not only aims to separate material spaces (e.g., schools, universities, buses, etc.) based on gender, but also to keep women out of socioeconomic spaces by restricting them from certain occupations, educational topics, activities, and so on. While trying to break through these barriers to socioeconomic spaces through hard work, many young women, including myself, started to challenge the segregation of material city spaces by wearing masculine clothes, binding our breasts, and cutting our hair short or shaving our heads to move more easily in public spaces. During the past decade, this strategy has been mobilized by feminist activists in Iran (many of them probably the same schoolgirls who cut their hair as an act of rebellion, now growing up to become activists) to fight against gender segregation. For example, they have begun to enter spaces that are forbidden for women, such as Azadi (i.e. 'freedom') stadium to watch football games.

It must be mentioned that cutting hair is not always intended as an activist move. It is also a way of making life livable for some people, for example trans men or people with atypical bodily abilities.

While cutting hair was a search for freedom for us, it was the only way for our trans friends to survive and to be true to themselves, risking much more than any of us as they walked bare headed in the streets. Another example is disabled people. A widely circulated picture of the protests is of a hijabi mother posting a photo of her neuroatypical child who cannot bear to wear hijab due to hypersensitivity. Cutting the child's hair short and making her live as a boy was a strategy the mother and child undertook for the girl's mobility, allowing her to exit the confines of her home.

Whether wishing to be a boy or having to live as one, in a context in which religious and cultural discourses of cis-femininity are bordering-in bodies, their movements and practices, cutting one's hair or shaving one's head is political. It is a mode of feminist resistance against descriptive ableist cis-gender norms and gender segregation. Crossing the carefully policed, superficial and imposed boundaries of gender operating through hair, these women are cutting ties with such norms by way of cutting their hair. It is as if they are saying: "I refuse to live the gendered life you have assigned to me, I am taking my body and my life back. I become a wo/man as I become a sinner. I become a sinner so that I can become a wo/man."

## Life

*For living a mundane life*  
*For the unreachable dreams of the child laborer*  
*For the fucked economy ...*  
*For the polluted air*  
*For the dying Vali-e-Asr trees*  
*For Pirooz and its approaching extinction ...*  
*For the Afghan kids ...*  
 (From "Baraye," by Shervin Hajipour, my translation)

"Zendegi" has the double meaning of life as well as living, and in my interpretation of the lyrics as well as the slogan, the concept is used during the protests to highlight both aspects. This is especially the case if one considers the connection

between the words and the act of cutting one's hair, which, as I discuss below, is done when a life is taken unjustly.

The protests were born out of mourning. Mourning the death of Mahsa Zhina. Mourning the deaths of Nika, Sarina, Hadis and others, as more names are listed every day. Teenage and young women (as well as boys and men, and cis/non-binary/trans people) dying unjustly for showing a few locks of hair, or for wanting to live a mundane life. Their unjust deaths not only brought *their* families to mourning, but also revitalized mourning for the victims of past tragedies, such as the families of those executed for no reason, victims of political mass murders, victims of ethnic violence carried out by the regime, passengers and crew on the Ukrainian plane that was downed in 2020, those whose lives were lost to COVID, those whose deaths were due to poverty and more; they all came together, united in mourning.

Cutting one's hair is an ancient practice of mourning in many cultures, including that of Iran. It is mentioned in *Shahnameh*, in the *Book of Kings*, where Ferdowsi depicts Farangis cutting her hair in mourning of her husband Siavash. When a woman withdraws from life by cutting her hair – this symbol of life and femininity – it represents a moment of great pain. This is not a passive act of mourning, however, for in withdrawing from life the woman is demanding accountability. It is to show rage and anger, a warning of what is yet to come, ignited by that fury. While the tradition has been fading away in Iran, it is still practiced although to a lesser extent in some areas and among certain ethnic minorities, such as Lor and Kurd minorities.

Mahsa Zhina was a Kurdish woman, and as her mother mourned her unjust death by pulling her hair, she was relaying her anger, her pain, and her cry for justice. This cry was heard by many in Iran and outside, as they took the scissors to their hair, practicing this ancient ritual and bringing it to life as a feminist activist mode of demanding justice against the "necropolitical" machinery of the Iranian regime (Mbembe 2008; Shakhshari 2014). It was a practice that mourned the death of Nika, a 16-year-old, whose dead body was released to her family 10 days after her death, only to be

stolen again at her burial ritual to hide what had been done to her body. Although it started as an act of mourning these young lives, the movement as it is today and as it is presented in the lyrics of “Baraye” is mourning all lives that have been subjected to such necropolitics. It is the death of bodies of water, forests, species (such as the Iranian cheetah Pirooz, mentioned in the song, who is the last of its kind) and more that is being mourned.

To cut one’s hair turns not merely into an act of mourning, but also into a public eulogy to all deaths in the margins: gender and sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, Afghan refugees, non-human species, nature. All are lives not only made killable by the necropower of the regime, but also made ungrievable, as they are buried without a eulogy (Butler 2004). Memories of them must remain unspoken as families are put under pressure or threatened with death if they mourn their loved ones publicly. Cutting one’s hair in public in such a relation of necropower becomes an act of resistance, a refusal to forget or to make them invisible as mourning defuses and extends itself beyond bereaved families. The cutting of hair is particularly important, as it is a practice of the Kurd ethnic minority, whose very existence as a group has been systematically targeted by the regime since the beginning of the revolution (Amnesty International 2008, 36–41). The cutting of hair becomes a symbolic act to mourn each death and all deaths together, human and nonhuman, those from the past still haunting the collective memory, those from the present and those that are yet to come if the regime stays in power.

Last but not least, cutting one’s hair could also be interpreted as a protest against living conditions in which people are debilitated by capitalist corrupt economy, in which they are living a “slow death” (Berlant 2007). It is to acknowledge the social death of the LGBTQ+ community whose members are banished into the shadows of constant fear, harassment, execution, or honor killing. They are living in dying. It is to ask for accountability for the lives and living conditions of the Afghan and Balouch children who are forced to live without an identity and in extreme poverty, or the child laborers whose dream is simply to go to school, and

for scattered families all over the world, attending their loved ones’ funerals through the screen of a mobile phone. Cutting one’s hair publicly could be understood as a plea for the political and social activists, university students and others who are imprisoned for no reason other than wanting to live a mundane life, who are watching life pass them by. The same is true of child brides, victims of sexual violence and those who have lost their lives, or taken their lives, as the result of a system that does not see them as worthy of life. Cutting one’s hair, then, is not only mourning a death, a eulogy, but is also a practice of testifying for those who are living in death while saying enough is enough.

## Freedom: Desexualizing the Body

*For the smile on your face ...  
For this forced heaven upon us ...  
For not suffocating under pressure ...  
For zan, zendegi, freedom ...  
(From “Baraye,” by Shervin Hajipour, my translation)*

For those growing up as part of the first post-revolution generation, hair was the battleground between *us* (women) and *them* (the regime). Not covering our hair properly in public was one of the most common reasons for being stopped by the morality police. It was argued that women have more control over their bodily urges than young boys/men do. Hence, the moral responsibility of the nation’s piety was on us to carry. By tucking our hair under the scarf as tightly as we could, it was said that we would protect not only ourselves and our virtue, but those of the young men and the nation too. In other words, a woman’s hair was presented as so powerful that a mere glimpse of it could change the path of a man from a life of righteousness to a life of sin and lead a nation to its destruction. Since I was curious to see how contemporary discourses of hair and hijab discussed this matter, I did a quick search online, I found many references to different Imams as well

as the prophet Mohammad in online forums and news channels for religious youth. However, this discourse is not only the stuff of my generation but is still ongoing. For example, in an article on the importance of hijab, Tasnim News, a private pro-government news agency, quotes Imam Reza, saying that “looking at married and unmarried women’s hair is haram [i.e. ‘forbidden’] because this gaze excites men and turns them on, hence leading them to ruin” (published on 25 Tir 1399/15 July 2020, my translation from Farsi).

To control such ‘destructive’ raw and sexual power, mandatory hijab is mobilized as a solution to the problem. Hence, hair is only to be revealed at home where women cannot be objects of desire due to Islamic kinship ties, or where they can be the rightful objects of desire to their husbands. To subdue our resisting souls towards mandatory hijab, texts often refer to divine punishments in hell, bringing such abstract notions of morality and sin to earth and locating them in the body to control young people through fear of bodily pain. For example, in the memory I share in the following, one can see how people in power attempt to convince us of the benefits of covering our hair through creating affective bodily strategies,

*The school guidance counselor and the Quran teacher stood up, pointing at the student, whose playful strands of hair had escaped the confines of the tight maghnaeh (hijab), and said: ‘You will be hung by your hair in the burning flames of hell.’ The student looked the teacher in the eyes and said: ‘But the hair will be burnt off immediately.’ The teacher replied: ‘In hell it will grow over and over, and you will be hung by it eternally to feel the pain.’ The student said, challenging the teacher: ‘I have lots of hair, I doubt it would be that painful’ The teacher said: ‘You shall be hung by the little amount you are showing, you shall feel the pain.’ That night I dreamed I was hung by my hair in hell while burning, waking up screaming. I couldn’t tell which hurt more: the pulling of hair on my skull or the burning flesh.*

The same discourse is still in use on TV, on billboards and in public speeches by the regime to condemn the protesters as ‘loose’ women, calling them names and trying to shame them into silence. Sinners who are held responsible for marriages falling apart by tempting other women’s men, destroying families, being the puppets of the west, and even natural disasters such as earthquakes are said to be the divine punishment brought upon people by God caused by women’s loose hijab. However, these days the discourse and narrative as such are not only mobilized to shame women into silence or control their bodies and sexualities, but also to reduce the demands of the protesters and their political agenda to a matter of “wanting to be naked in public.” In this context, cutting their hair is an act of deterritorialization of their heavily sexualized bodies. They are reterritorializing their hair by taking control over it, by refusing to submit to such affective rhetoric and promises of hell with which they have been indoctrinated at every corner: at school, at university, on TV, on billboards and in most contexts. Instead, by choosing the material life of this world over the forced promises of their heaven, the protesters welcome mortal pain (the pain of losing a loved one, the pain of being beaten up and shot at, the pain of being tortured, the pain of cutting one’s hair). The protesters, these *sinful* women, are bringing hell to earth and are unleashing it on the regime.

## Hands Off My Body, Life, and Identity!

*For zan, zendegi, freedom ...*

*For Freedom ....*

*For Freedom...*

*(From “Baraye,” by Shervin Hajipour, my translation)*

In this essay, I have reflected on the current protests are of a feminist intersectional nature, as I have attempted to trace the practice of cutting one’s hair as a feminist act of resistance against the gendered, ethnic, and sexualized politics of

hair within the Islamic regime of Iran. The protest is connected to the long history of resistance against the regime's gender politics. Iranian women have been fighting this battle since the beginning of the revolution, refusing to submit to such dress codes (e.g., Rahbari, Longman and Coene 2019; Mir-Hosseini 2007). One contemporary example of such resistance that was formed in a more organized way is the *My Stealthy Freedom* activist movement, initiated in 2014 by Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad, now in exile. This campaign invited women to unite across boundaries of religion (including believers and non-believers), class and ethnicity, and to post pictures of themselves without a hijab in public spaces as a feminist act of reclaiming these public spaces through civil disobedience (Nasehi 2017). The years 2017 and 2018 marked another series of acts of civil disobedience when young Iranian women tied their scarves to sticks and held them over their heads in major city squares. This was inspired by Vida Movahed, who stood on a utility box in Meydan-e-Enghelab (Revolution Avenue), tied her white headscarf to a stick instead of wearing it, and held it over her head like a flag. She was arrested the following day. This is to say that the current protests have not come out of nowhere. The fight started on the streets 43 years ago, when wearing colorful clothing, loosening the knot of the scarf under one's chin, putting on makeup, driving a car, laughing loud in the streets became a sin in the name of religion and modesty. Starting then, one woman at a time fought to deterritorialize her marked body (by gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion) and demanded her freedom of choice through peaceful civil disobedience, that is, walking the streets in their chosen clothes. Slowly coming together, organizing online and offline, one by one, these women, their daughters and granddaughters have become the force of the protests in 2022.

Moreover, it is not only the regime's gender politics that are challenged in these protests, but also sexual and ethnic politics of the regime and its vision of the united Islamic nation, which they have been trying to establish through controlling female bodies. In post-revolution Iran, the regime's compulsory hijab policy was not only intended to deal with the question of women and their place in this new Islamic order. The policy also aimed for the assimilation of multiple ethnic and religious minorities who had their own cultural practices and clothing. Many ethnic minorities, such as Kurd, Lor and Balouch minorities, have their own clothing, with significant colorful patterns for women, including long skirts and head coverings (which could be considered as a full hijab).<sup>3</sup> The new dress code (a headscarf, manto, pants and a chador in dark colors) was meant to erase such ethnic signifiers and move towards a united Islamic nation (e.g., Koo 2014; Mohammadi et al. 2022; Foroutan 2020). This is extremely important as Mahsa Zhina Amini was part of a Kurdish minority and that the regime's responses to the protests in Zahedan and Kurdistan, home to the Kurd and Balouch minority groups, have been most brutal, even called a genocide, reflecting the regime's ethnic politics.

Since, hijab and covering one's hair is argued by the regime to be the backbone of the Islamic state and a pillar of building a prevailing Islamic nation, any removal, showing, or cutting of one's hair in public becomes politically significant. It transforms into a feminist act of resistance through civil disobedience targeting the so-called backbone of the regime, its ideology, and politics. While chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom" and cutting their hair, these women are fighting against cis-heteronormativity, ableism, gender segregation, systematic violence against ethnic minorities, and many other oppressive structures. This is indeed a feminist intersectional revolution.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The current protests are not 'peaceful', unlike the Green Movement. The protests encompass a much more diverse group of people in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Mass demonstrations are being orchestrated by Iranians in diaspora and allies all over the world, which makes the protests a transnational phenomenon. The protests also include a digital fight between the regime's cyber-police, hacktivists, and social media activists who try to be the voice of Iran.
- <sup>2</sup> As an Iranian woman in exile, I find it important to situate my essay in a way that does not contribute to Islamophobia. What I am discussing in this essay is the Iranian Islamic regime's utilization of Islam as a way of governing. This has nothing to do with individuals' beliefs or people's choice to wear hijab or practice Islam. Simultaneously, I am not interested in evoking a romanticized notion of 'one true' Islam against which the Iranian version is a 'false' one or 'unreal'. To me, Islam is a situated phenomenon that is connected to a place, local culture, history, ethnic diversity and more. But more importantly it is embodied and lived. Therefore, to tell Iranian women who have been living a Muslim life in Iran, whether by choice or not, that what they have experienced is not the 'real' Islam would be unethical. Coming from a feminist new materialism tradition, Islam, to me, is multiple. It emerges in relation to a certain context and time (Khawaja 2014). While these multiple emergences share certain elements, they cannot be reduced to one or the other. In other words, I do not analyze the veil or covering one's hair as a religious practice or as a matter of cultural identity. Instead, I analyze it as a signifier under which a nation ought to be united, through imposing mandatory hijab as an apparatus of bodily production (Mahmood 2011, Najmabadi 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> I was born and raised in Tehran. My mother is from the northern city of Rasht and my father is part of the Lor minority located in the west of Iran. Although I grew up in a multi-ethnic environment where many cultural practices were cited, I have never been subjected to violence or discrimination due to my ethnic background as I always passed as being in the center. Hence, I do not wish to speak for the experience of such minorities who have been exposed to multiple strategies of ethnic cleansing, from higher execution rates to extreme poverty and surveillance. What I wish to highlight, though, is the systematic violence used by the regime against them.

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