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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

(Gender) Politics in the Field: The Precarities of Diasporic (Women) Scholars of Iranian Politics during and after the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Uprising

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On August 25, 2023, during the Tenth European Conference of Iranian Studies, I had the privilege of co-organizing a panel titled “Women’s Resistance, Resilience, and Trauma in Iran: Trajectories, Memories, and Mobilizations.” In this panel, I shared initial insights from my project, “The WLF Uprising in Iran: Women’s Activism and the Shifting Grounds of Religion.” After the panel ended and as we were exchanging thoughts on it with the other three panelists, we were informed by a venue organizer that an individual associated with the Iranian embassy in the Netherlands had attended our session and photographed all of us—four women scholars—during our presentations, only to leave before the session concluded. I stepped out of the conference room quickly and attempted to find this person in the main hall to confront them and inquire about their motives, but they had already left the venue.

Reflecting on the incident after the conference, I contemplated the broader implications for scholars researching sensitive subjects related to Iran, especially those who do not share my privilege of having dual Iranian-European nationality. This privilege shields me from the stresses of visa renewals and deportation risks that other scholars from the Global South have to deal with (see testimonials of this in [Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023](#)). I have also come to terms with the fact that I may never visit my birth country again, as long as the current regime is in power, as I may face persecution and imprisonment because of my academic work. However, for Iranian scholars holding only Iranian nationality, incidents such as the one we experienced in the conference room could be deeply distressing and may discourage them from practicing their academic freedom and influence their disciplinary approaches and the research topics they choose to pursue.

This Note from the Field dives into some of the complicated and confusing aspects of occupying an academic space as a (woman) scholar of Iranian politics in the diaspora during and after the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) Uprising. WLF was the largest anti-state popular uprising in Iran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It erupted in September 2022, first in the Kurdistan province of Iran, and quickly spread throughout the country. The uprising, named after the popular slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom,” which was chanted by protesters across the country, began after Zhina-Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman, was killed by Iranian police for not wearing the hijab “correctly.” The Islamic Republic of Iran’s (IRI) strict and arbitrarily implemented public decency laws, enforced since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, have made wearing the hijab (a cloth covering everything except for the hands and face) compulsory for all women over the age of eight. The WLF uprising, which has been called a feminist uprising (Tajbakhsh 2022), opposed the compulsory veiling law as well as the IRI itself and attracted global attention in the media, in the public sphere, and in academic scholarship on Iranian politics.

In this essay, I attempt to address some of the challenges faced by scholars of Iranian politics during and after the WLF uprising and political pressure faced from external parties like the Iranian state, as well as from within the diasporic (scholarly) community. My objective extends beyond merely highlighting the challenges of researching social movements in Iran. It involves an effort to navigate the challenges of researching, speaking openly about and taking a scholarly position after the WLF uprising in a heated and charged political environment. My concern is, therefore, not only the technicalities of conducting research remotely and the struggles with exercising one’s academic freedom (Sultana 2018)—and hence academic rigor—but also questions of integrity and safety for the scholars and academics involved and how the nexus of academic and identitarian positionalities impact the lived experiences of diasporic (woman) scholars of politics in Iran during and after the WLF uprising.

Working under Transnational Repression

While the IRI repression of academics in Iran has been widely documented (Mojab 2004; Rezai-Rashti 2013), diasporic scholars of Iran, particularly those delving into topics deemed sensitive by the Iranian regime, are not immune from political pressure and transnational repression (Moss 2016). In fact, most of us are somewhat accustomed to various forms of intimidation and surveillance and are aware of some of the potential repercussions our scholarship might have for our lives as academics and individuals. There is also an exchange of knowledge about this within the diasporic scholars’ community. I have personally had many interactions with early career researchers about the potential and very gendered impacts of their work on their (sense of) safety, academic aspirations, mobility, and access to their birth/home/first country and life course.

The Iranian regime’s surveillance ranges from practices within Iran itself, where students and staff may report on each other to political authorities, to methods in the diaspora, including social media harassment, and, as explained

above, being photographed, filmed, or monitored publicly or privately. While surveillance is an everyday part of the lives of Iranians (no matter where they are), it increases during and after periods of large-scale protest. This experience is not limited to academics (private individuals were surveilled during the street protests of the WLF uprising; see, for example, Geels 2022; Michaelsen 2018), but the way academia expects and encourages scholars to publish and promote their work openly and publicly can exacerbate already existing vulnerabilities. This surveillance disproportionately affects a significant number of diasporic women scholars (and activists), as they constitute the majority of researchers studying gender and sexual politics, as well as women's rights in Iran.

For some exiled scholars, departure and seeking a home institution outside Iran has been the only viable option to continue to produce research, but the decision to depart from Iran is laden with complexities and obstacles. These challenges often stem not only from the constraints imposed by the IRI but also from the stringent migration policies of countries in the Global North (see testimonials of mobility restrictions in Rahbari and Burlyuk 2024; Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023). For some scholars, this move often signifies a one-way journey. Engagement with sensitive topics that displease the Iranian state renders the possibility of return not just impractical but perilous, especially for those holding dual Iranian-European nationality, who find themselves vulnerable to being used as pawns in geopolitical negotiations (for advantages and disadvantages of dual nationality, see, for example, Rahbari 2022b, a). In my conversations with a number of Iranian diaspora scholars—some possessing only one nationality, whereas others hold dual citizenship—a substantial majority engaged in research on Iranian politics and disclosed that their academic work and the fear of prosecution in Iran have led them to dismiss the option of returning to or visiting Iran. One scholar told me that she has actively avoided writing or engaging publicly about the WLF uprising—even though she felt guilty about it—because of a complicated family situation that requires her to travel to Iran.

The struggles of those who self-exile reflect the broader struggles within a society grappling with the constraints of authoritarianism and restrictions to freedom of speech and academic freedom. This is not to claim that academic freedom is perfectly respected and upheld in the Global North (for literature that discusses the nuances of academic freedom in the Global North, see, for example, Vatansever and Kölemen 2022; Karran 2007; Lynch and Ivancheva 2015), but the threats to academic freedom and repercussions for academics in undemocratic and authoritarian countries such as Iran—including imprisonment, displacement, and serious risks to their own life and livelihood as well as their family members—could be comparatively more severe.

Experiences of (Online) Solidarity and Hostility

The WLF uprising has achieved something phenomenal by uniting people from diverse ethnic, religious, class, age, and gender backgrounds. From the 2022 strike of Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical workers (Sinaiee 2022) and the supportive statements from Baluchi women (one of the major ethnic minority

groups in Iran) (Akhbar-rooz 2022) to celebrities both inside and outside the country (VOA News 2022) publicly joining the uprising and school girls' joining the protests while at school, the primary message of the WLF uprising has clearly been one of solidarity and unity. As feminist scholars have pointed out, solidarity cannot and should not be based on the similarity of social conditions and identities or demands (Mohanty 2003). There is, however, mounting pressure on activists, politicians, and scholars to adopt unequivocal stances on contentious issues, such as the nature of the WLF uprising, its future goals, people's demands, its political leadership, and relation to religion/religiosity in Iran.

This prevailing insistence on binary perspectives stifles nuanced discussion, reducing complex debates to oversimplified dichotomies. Ironically, the same scholars whose work would have suffered suppression in Iran cannot exercise their academic freedom in institutions in the Global North because of hostilities with the diasporic (academic) community. As Rivetti and Saeidi (2023) eloquently argue, critiques of liberal and imperialist white feminism, specifically, struggle to find a space in Iran and the diaspora, and the strong anti-police sentiment that originally was widespread within the population seems to be surpassed by expressions of a carceral mentality, as some activists in Iran and the diaspora compile and publish lists of academics, journalists, and intellectuals, accusing them of being regime apologists and sometimes even co-responsible for the atrocities committed by the IRI. A discursive colonization of "third world" women's lives and struggles, which Mohanty (2003) warned feminist scholars about, is taking place by diasporic Iranians located in the Global North.

Additionally, the extent to which social media can exacerbate divisions and echo chambers, specifically during social uprisings, has already been observed (Kozman et al. 2022). A particularly salient issue in the context of the WLF uprising is the targeting of women scholars, some of whom experienced (social media) harassment after providing their analysis of the situation in Iran after the WLF uprising.¹ The attacks are coordinated by the Iranian regime's cyber army that notoriously targets political dissidents and IRI's critics in different spheres (Farwell and Arakelian 2013), but also sometimes originate from within the Iranian diasporic (scholarly) community. These attacks seek to undermine professional contributions and reduce these scholars to "regime apologists" and "lobbyists for Iran." The harassment has a distinctly gendered nature as harassers sometimes refer to women scholars with problematic misogynistic language. This form of harassment extends beyond individual experiences, touching on the broader systemic problem of misogyny, even within progressive movements. As clear in the WLF movement's slogans, progressive and emancipatory messages that glorify Zhina-Mahsa and other victims of the IRI's atrocities appear side by side with masculine and vulgar sexual expressions.

Remoteness, Accountability, and Feminist Reflexivity

For diasporic scholars working on contemporary Iranian politics, access to data and fields of research has been a constant struggle. The degrees and forms of access to data in Iran depend, among other factors, on the scholar's profile,

research topics and approaches, their country of residence, and the political situation in Iran when they consider visiting it. IRI has been consistently hostile to universities and academics, but openness and levels of hostility to researchers have somewhat depended on the ruling government, often characterized either as reformist or conservative (Golkar 2012).

The lack of official statistics on many issues related to women and other gender and sexual minority groups—for example, all forms of violence against women, illegal abortions, and child marriage (Rahbari 2023)—and the practical impossibility of gathering extensive, reliable data on such topics have led diasporic scholars to adopt strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by remoteness and access restrictions. Some scholars have adapted by leveraging the digital landscape to gather data. This includes conducting interviews online, which allows for direct engagement with subjects without the need for physical presence. Many others delve into secondary data sources, such as analyzing social media, policy, media content, or cultural productions. These approaches circumvent some of the limitations imposed by a lack of access to first-hand experiences, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of diasporic academics as well as the evolving nature of research in the digital age. Although such tactics have proven extremely useful in producing knowledge on Iran, despite the limitations, the reliance on digital tools and secondary sources, though innovative, can introduce constraints related to the authenticity of the data collected.

On a personal level, as a diasporic woman scholar of Iranian politics, researching an uprising that is centrally about women's rights in Iran has been emotionally challenging. Even though I have been anxiously observing from a distance, constantly reading, following the news, and updating myself on developments in "the field" through an extensive network located inside Iran, it has been impossible for me to escape a sense of alienation from the context I research. This alienation is not about caring less but about feeling a responsibility to acknowledge my detachment from the everyday realities that women and other marginalized groups in Iran, whom I study remotely, endure. As Chandra Mohanty's article "Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles" beautifully explains (Mohanty 2003), with the change of one's politics of location (Rich 1985), there comes a responsibility to rethink, self-reflexively, the implications of one's new positionality.

This responsibility entails carefully considering which voices ought to be amplified foremost, contemplating the role of academia in these dialogues, and making informed decisions about the appropriateness of speaking up, the tone that should be adopted, or the times when silence might be the most prudent choice. Black (feminist) scholarship has raised the issue of accountability and the relationship between diaspora and indigeneity in favor of understanding historical bonds and alliances between the two rather than considering them entirely distinct categories (Aguila-Way 2020). For the Iranian diaspora, given the precarity of scholars operating within Iran as well as the heightened vulnerability after the WLF uprising, their voices often assume a more prominent position, thereby also magnifying their responsibility.

I would like to close by acknowledging that there is great privilege in being a scholar of Iranian politics outside of Iran. The advantages are numerous, from higher degrees of academic freedom to evading persecution, among many others. My focus on the experience of diasporic scholars with what has been called transnational repression (Dukalskis et al. 2022) should in no way be taken as a declaration of victimhood, particularly not in comparison to scholars inside Iran, but as an extension of how lives—including those in academia—are affected by the transnational reach of repression cast by the Iranian regime, impacting academics far beyond its national borders.

Note

1. For their protection, these scholars are kept anonymous.

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