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To cite this article: Erfani, R. (2020). Intersectional Oppression, Resistance, and Privileges: Three Stories of Iranian Women. *Al-Raida*, 44(1), 15-23.

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Article type: Article

Published online: 20th August 2020

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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Intersectional Oppressions, Resistance, and Privileges: Three Stories of Iranian Women

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Keywords: Women, Iran, protests, women's rights

Introduction

An old woman states her demands, too: "Some people plundered a grocery store on Saturday. I don't agree with these actions. This is the right of the people [*haqul nas*]." She suddenly bursts into tears: "I always say my prayers, but I entered the store that day and took a 10-kilo bag of rice! God forgives me! We haven't had rice for two months. I couldn't afford it. God forgives me" (Khosravi Olya, 2019, author translation).

This excerpt is from a newspaper article based on conversations with ordinary people in Shahriar, a suburb of Tehran. Published on November 29, 2019, the report covers the massive antigovernment protests that occurred in multiple cities and small towns in Iran following a sudden gas price increase, which had been announced at midnight a few days earlier on November 14. On that date, the government announced two changes to its gasoline subsidy policies: first, the new rationing system allowed each passenger vehicle 60 liters per month for 15,000 rials per liter (a 50% price hike); second, the price for purchases over the allocated amount rose to 30,000 rials (a 200% hike) (Khajehpour, 2019). In response to these measures, angry citizens set fire to gas stations and more than 700 banks and official government buildings, calling for the overthrow of the government. The security forces responded with violence and a week-long Internet shutdown to block information-sharing about the protests, which led to more public discontent

not only in Tehran and other major cities, but in small towns as well. The crisis continued for several weeks, with an official number of 7,000 protesters, journalists, and students arrested, and over 300 killed according to Amnesty International (2019). Unofficial sources have estimated the number of killed citizens of up to 5 times more than this.

In the upcoming months, many articles will be written to analyze the social, political, international, and economic costs and consequences of the series of events that occurred this past November in Iran. But only an intersectional approach can clarify the interplay of social factors such as gender, class, age, education, ethnicity, religion, and ability in the current situation. An intersectional perspective sheds light on how women with different levels of education and belonging to different age and ethnic groups, social classes, and religious minorities are affected by the current situation, and how they might try to influence it. The aim of this article is to examine women's intersecting efforts, oppressions, agency, resistance, resilience, and privilege in Iranian society and politics, and to argue for analytical endeavors that adopt intersectional frameworks.

One: Oppression

The economic pressure was already ongoing when gas prices increased, due to US-led economic and financial sanctions that had been instituted to prevent Iran from having access to nuclear capabilities.¹ Starting in 2012, the sanctions caused an 11.8% reduction in gross domestic product growth, an inflation rate of nearly 40%, and a 200% depreciation of the Iranian currency (Aloosh et al., 2019). Ultimately, the sanctions resulted in the collapse of the Iranian economy, and the consequences were most heavily felt in the public health sector, including limited access to medication and care (especially for patients with chronic diseases and disabilities), widening health gaps between different social groups, an increase in mental health problems, and a general decline in people's overall well-being (Asadi-Pooya et al., 2019).

The elderly woman quoted at the beginning of this piece is among the most vulnerable and marginalized victims not only of the sanctions, but of the broader economic problems caused by the government's corruption and financial mismanagement. Her access to capital and employment and her right to health² were already limited before the fuel price increase, and worsened thereafter. In fact, sanctions resulted in the unemployment of more than three million people, and this disproportionately affected lower-class women (Plecher, 2020): while in 2006

labor force participation rates were 65% for men and 20% for women, in 2017 only 14.9% of 28 million women (aged 15–64 years) participated in the labor force (with men’s participation remaining at 64%) (World Bank 2020). This shows that economic and financial sanctions immensely affect women’s livelihoods, and often force them to leave the job market in a society where male workers are preferred by employers. Therefore, “despite their low participation rates, the percentage of unemployed women [is] higher than that of men,” making Iranian women’s labor force participation the lowest in the world (Financial Tribune, 2017). The high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty, the maintenance of a low-paid and specifically gendered workforce, job insecurity, and increased living costs have mostly, and often violently, affected the lives of high-risk women and girls, especially marginalized groups such as single mothers, ethnic, religious, or sectarian minorities,³ people with disabilities, widows, and landless women farmers.⁴

Two: Resistance

On January 15, 2020, Shahnaz Akmal, the mother of a protester killed in the 2009 Ashura demonstrations, was arrested and taken to Evin Prison in Tehran to serve a one-year sentence.⁵ Akmal had been charged with “propaganda against the state” because she had sought justice for her son, Mostafa Karimbeigi, who was shot in the head during the protests against the results of the Iranian presidential election in June 2009, which led to the controversial reelection of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Dehghan, 2017). Becoming a human rights and political activist after the incident, Akmal referred to her son as مظلوم (*mazlum*), a concept used to describe Imam Hussain and his companions in Ashura, who gave their lives for justice. She also called herself the “mother of a martyr,” a notion that is not only associated with respect, strength, patience, and devotion in the Shi’a tradition but also has important connotations related to the role of women in Iran, especially in relation to the Iraq–Iran war (1980–1988), in which thousands of women lost their sons (Akmal, 2020). In fact, the image of an old, suffering woman with a picture of a soldier in her hands, waiting for an update from him or mourning his death, is still a strong political image that can not only be found in Iranian cinema and literature, but is also painted on the walls and billboards of Iranian cities. The death of Akmal’s son and her subsequent suffering has gained her similar respect and attention, and has resulted in what might be called gendered social capital. In

other words, her status as the mother of a martyr has made her an image of resistance and a reference point for other women, especially mothers, in Iran.⁶ For example, Akmalı attended mourning ceremonies for young protesters killed in the November 2019 demonstrations to show her solidarity as a prominent human rights defender and popular social figure. She has been also active in campaigning for other political activists and prisoners over the past 10 years, which has included visiting their families. All of this has allowed her to connect with and unite other mothers and women to stand up for justice. Her ways of confronting the state center on demands for peace and justice. In this regard, she repeatedly states that she wants to break the cycle of violence in society, and that her only demand is for a judicial system that will hold the state's violent behavior to account. Akmalı's choice of Twitter as a platform for nonviolent political resistance also suggests how traditional ideas of motherhood/womanhood are being challenged by middle- and upper-class middle-aged women in contemporary Iran, who see and use social media and other web-based technologies as a means of empowerment. Although Twitter is filtered in Iran, Akmalı uses it to exercise her political agency and autonomy, and to connect with ordinary middle-class citizens like herself. Akmalı's experience is evidence of the complex relationship between gender, religion, resistance, and resilience, whereby women build on the religious culture and emotional-political powers of the Shi'a tradition in Iranian society.

Three: Privilege

One of the main critics of the use of state violence against the November demonstrations was Parvaneh Salahshouri, a member of parliament and head of the Women's Faction, an all-female parliamentary group. Coming from the Bakhtiari ethnic group, and holding a PhD in sociology, Salahshouri has played a central role in the 94% male-dominated parliament of Iran. Her popularity as a women's rights activist has been mostly earned through her efforts to lift the ban against women watching soccer games in stadiums, and to grant citizenship to the children of Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers. Until October 2019, Iranian citizenship was only conferred by fathers, meaning that children of Iranian mothers whose fathers were (mostly Afghan and Iraqi) workers and immigrants remained undocumented until the age of 18, with little or no

access to public education and many other services (BBC Persian, 2019). Salahshouri has also tried to introduce a bill on health insurance and retirement plans for Iranian housewives, which would mostly serve lower- and middle-class women.

Not surprisingly, Salahshouri (2019) has been constantly attacked over the past four years, not only by radicals and religious extremists, but also by the regime's opponents (mostly those living in the West) for being part of the ruling class. She is often verbally abused on Twitter by monarchists, who use sexist comments and sexually offensive language to oppose her reformist stands, her political views on different issues, and her choice of hijab (the chador).⁷ As a university professor Salahshouri has high social status, and as a member of parliament she is among the most politically privileged women in Iranian history, since only 50 women have ever served as parliamentarians. However, she is also oppressed by the same misogynistic laws and culture that see women as the second sex,⁸ and by power structures that do not tolerate a woman espousing unconventional views or seeking political power. Her oppressions and privileges can therefore only be understood through an intersectional framework. Salahshouri focuses on a variety of women's demands, from younger women's interest in attending soccer games to elderly middle- and lower-class women's desire for a publicly financed insurance plan to cover their healthcare and retirement.⁹ She has also tried to improve the lives of marginalized women married to foreign workers¹⁰ through her efforts to pass the law granting citizenship to the children of Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers. Salahshouri's women's rights activism is therefore intersectional, as it tries to cover vulnerabilities resulting from gender, class, ethnicity, citizenship, and ability.

What Fo(u)r?

In the analysis above, I discussed three examples of how an intersectional analysis offers insights into the complexity of women's lives in Iran at this particular moment in time. The three stories of oppression, resistance, and privilege shed light on how women's interlocking and diverse forms of oppression are intertwined with privileges that sometimes, as in the case of Shahnaz Akmal, are the outcome of a specific form of violence and oppression that they have faced.

Together, these three stories reveal the importance of considering the intersecting character of women's various lived experiences, their multiple forms of resistance, their privileges, and the ways they incorporate those privileges into their activism, which enables us to understand how women act, react, or interact in sociopolitical crises such as the November protests. The three stories provide a context for understanding Iranian women's social and political lives and futures, and they suggest that if we wish to present comprehensive analyses of gender and social change, we need to focus on intersectionality to be able to see the interplays of power and their role in imagining and offering a better future for women.

Notes

¹Iran's access to such capabilities was represented as a violation of the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

²Several public health and epidemiology researchers have repeatedly warned that the "lack of and inadequate access to capital in [Iran] has severely limited cancer patients' access to pharmaceuticals and other necessary lifesaving treatments. Iran has the highest incidence of cancer in the Middle East, and this region is predicted to face the most exponential increase in cancer incidence in the next decade" (Shahabi et al., 2015, p. 1310; see also Moret, 2015).

³For example, see Khezri et al.'s (2019) study on unemployment and social injustice in a Kurdish–Iranian context.

⁴Due to patriarchal inheritance laws in the name of Islamic Sharia, Iranian women continue to have little access to land and property. The gender gap in the ownership of agricultural land is even higher: the FAO indicates that 94.1% of agricultural landholders in Iran are men (FAO, 2015).

⁵Akmali was also sentenced to a two-year ban from social media, political activities, and traveling outside of Iran (Amnesty Iran, 2020).

⁶Using the word شهید (martyr) to refer to Mostafa Karimbeigi and other killed protesters is extremely controversial, as in the formal narratives of the Islamic Republic "martyr" is only used to refer to those killed in the Iraq–Iran war, soldiers killed in border battles, police, security guards, or firefighters who die or are killed while on duty. In fact, the way the state uses the word "martyr" is more than religious; it is an extremely political-rhetorical practice to distinguish those whose (cause of) death is legitimate and in accordance with the regime's values and interests. Martyrs' families receive certain services and benefits from the government, and special attention from the official media. During a political crisis, the application of the word to civilians can be used as a propaganda strategy (to signal who is/was with "us") or even a strategy of apology (to signal whose death is/was on "us"). The most recent example of the latter is the naming of the victims of flight PS752 "martyrs," which was refused and challenged by some victims' families.

⁷Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, covering the head and body is mandatory for Iranian women (parliament ratified the penalty for disobedience in 1983). Since then, women and girls over nine years of age have been obliged to wear loose outfits and headscarves in public, a rule that has been challenged by women's rights and anti-compulsory hijab activists over the past few years. Religious women wear the chador, a full body-length fabric that only leaves the face exposed.

⁸In a speech to the Defending Women's Rights seminar at the University of Guilan, Salahshouri explained that "women are the second sex in Iranian law" as they need to seek a father's or husband's permission to get a passport or continue their education, cannot petition for divorce, and cannot even cycle in public (Saber, 2019).

⁹Another source of privilege for Salahshouri is her religion: she is a Shi'a, and her reading of Islam and Shi'ism is close to the formal narrative of the Islamic Republic. Every parliamentary, presidential, or city council candidate has to be approved by the Guardian Council; if she had not been Shi'a and practiced Islam in line with the regime, she might not have received approval.

¹⁰These women are mostly lower class and live in the suburbs.

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