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Fearless Voices:

The Evolution of Women's Role in Iranian Media from the Post-Revolution Era to the Women, Life, Freedom Movement

16 SEPTEMBER 2026

Djanan Deghati



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Background

About the Research Team

Djanaan Deghati – Lead Researcher | Djanaan Deghati is the inaugural Mahsa Jina Amini Fellow at the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF), where she conducts research under the Forum's Women's Leadership Initiative. Her work focuses on the intersections of gender, women's rights, activism, and societal transformation in Iran and the wider Middle East and North Africa region.

Djanaan holds a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from SOAS University of London, with a particular focus on Gender and Law in the Middle East and North Africa. Her graduate research examined Zanan, the pioneering Iranian feminist publication, and its navigation of censorship in Iran. She also has an academic background in Linguistics and Islamic Studies from La Sorbonne and l'École du Louvre, alongside professional experience spanning research, education, and cultural institutions.

Drawing on this interdisciplinary background and her Iranian-French heritage, Djanaan brings to the project a research perspective attentive to both scholarly analysis and the lived realities of women confronting political, legal, and social constraints.

Dr Nina Ansary – Research Supervisor | Dr Nina Ansary is the Director of the Women's Leadership Initiative at Cambridge MENAF and a member of the Forum's Advisory Board. An award-winning Iranian-American author, historian, and women's rights advocate, her interdisciplinary scholarship examines the history of women's rights in Iran and the broader consequences of institutionalised gender discrimination.

Dr Ansary received her M.A. in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies and her Ph.D. in History from Columbia University. She is the author of *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran*, based on her doctoral research, and *Anonymous Is a Woman: A Global Chronicle of Gender Inequality*, which examines the historical exclusion of women and the continuing struggle for equal rights. Her wider work has included serving as a UN Women Global Champion for Innovation and as a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

Institutional Support

The research project has also benefited from the institutional support of the Cambridge MENAF Executive Committee, particularly **Shlomo Roiter Jesner**, President, and **Patrik Kurath**, Executive Vice President. Their contributions have included logistical coordination and editorial support, helping to facilitate the research process and the preparation of this report.

Introduction

Contextualization and Presentation of the Topic

Over the past four decades, women journalists in Iran have created a culture of resistance in the face of recurring repression of the Islamic Republic while consistently advocating for women's rights more broadly. This tradition of bold journalism was carried across generations, as women journalists learned how to navigate censorship and engage with a changing and hostile political landscape. In September 2022, two women journalists reported the death of a twenty-two-year-old woman, Mahsa Jina Amini. Niloofar Hamedei photographed a grieving family outside a Tehran hospital while Elaheh Mohammadi covered the funeral of Mahsa Jina Amini in her hometown of Saqqez. Both were arrested shortly after. Mahsa Jina Amini had been detained for allegedly violating the Islamic Republic's mandatory veiling laws. Her death in "morality police" custody marked the beginning of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, with Hamedei and Mohammadi's reporting playing a crucial role in documenting and circulating the events from which it emerged. The story of women journalists in Iran did not start in 2022, and it cannot be understood without tracing its roots back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Since the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the history of the women's press has been intertwined with the history of Iran itself. Despite censorship, closures, arrests and recurrent periods of outright repression, Iranian women have built a vibrant journalistic culture by founding publications, editing magazines and reporting from the margins of society. The first decade after the Revolution is marked by a restructuring of the media sector and the imposition of an Islamic ideological framework on it. Women suffer from systemic gender exclusion while widespread purges within media institutions reshape journalism as a moral-religious institution. Representation of women in media becomes tightly controlled and aligned with revolutionary ideals.

The 1990s witness a relative opening of the public sphere, culminating in the rise of reformist newspapers and the emergence of *Zanan* (زنانه) magazine as one of the platforms for gender debates. Women journalists re-enter the media sector in greater numbers and begin to function as critical interlocutors on issues of law, rights, and social change. This period is crucial for understanding the formation of "insider feminist journalism," in which women work within the boundaries of state-controlled media yet push them from within. The deeply political and largely underchronicled culture of journalistic resistance is embodied by figures such as Shahla Sherkat, who founded the magazine *Zanan* and kept it alive for sixteen years, and Jila Baniyaghoob, who kept publishing her articles online in spite of censorship and arrest.

The early 2000s bring renewed censorship, the closure of reformist outlets, and intensified pressure on journalists. However, digital platforms, blogs, and the early stages of social media helped journalists communicate while evading repression. Many women journalists shift to hybrid forms of practice that combine traditional reporting with digital activism. This period introduces new forms of practice, marking an important transition from institutional journalism to digitally mediated modes of expression.

The 2009 Green Movement marks a turning point, after which the media landscape and the risks associated with journalistic work change drastically. The regime develops an advanced system of surveillance, which results in the arrest of many journalists and pushes others into exile. At the same time, journalists adopt new technologies, including encrypted messaging, social media documentation and network reporting. This period is crucial to building the infrastructure and foundations for contemporary forms of resistance journalism.

The death of Mahsa Jina Amini in 2022 marks a turning point in Iranian political and media history. The women journalists who reported on the story – Elaheh Mohammadi and Niloofar Hamedī – play a central role by documenting the event that would shake the country, despite the immediate risk to their safety.

The women's press in Iran is a reflection of Iranian society as a whole: its contradictions, the political cycles of opening and closure, and the persistent negotiations between state power and civil life.

To this day, the history of the women's press and the role of women journalists as activists have only been studied sporadically in articles or isolated chapters. This research attempts to fill that gap and offer a coherent historical account. Structured across seven chapters, it traces the evolution of women's participation in Iranian media from the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution to the journalistic practices that shaped and documented the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, a history that is at once political, cultural, and epistemic. The first three chapters lay the historical foundation. The account begins with the post-revolutionary reconfiguration of Iranian society – which led to a systemic gender exclusion, an islamisation of media institutions and the establishment of long-term structural constraints – and then moves through the 1990s. This was a decade marked by a relative opening due to reformist politics and the growing assertiveness of the feminist press. This was mainly carried further by Shahla Sherkat and the magazine *Zanan*, which operated until the beginning of the 2000s, when a period of harsher censorship began, but when the rise of blogs, websites and the turn to digital platforms also became prominent. The Green Movement of 2009, examined in chapter four, marks a turning point marked by the criminalisation of journalism, intensified repression, and women journalists' particular vulnerability. As repression intensified in the early 2010s, the fourth chapter also traces the strategies of continuity and adaptation that women journalists developed in response. Chapters five and six focus on 2022 and Mahsa Jina Amini's story, a moment of media and political rupture, with the collapse of negotiated boundaries and the central role of women journalists in the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. The conceptualisation of fearless journalism is studied through practical case studies and theorised as a gendered mode of resistance. Lastly, chapter seven reviews the four decades since the 1979 Revolution through a feminist epistemology, in the aftermath of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

Central Research Question

The central paradox is that in spite of a repressive and brutal regime, women journalists have created spaces of resistance through their publications by negotiating boundaries and navigating censorship. They have made themselves a major part of the cultural and political landscape of Iran. The work of women journalists and the women's press is central to the contestation of the regime. The core question guiding this piece of work is **how the role of women in Iranian media evolved from the post-revolutionary period to the post-Woman, Life, Freedom era.**

Three sub-questions structure the inquiry. The first question concerns the forces of transformation: what political, social, and cultural dynamics have driven the successive shifts in women's participation in journalism? The second question pushes further and examines continuity and rupture across generations: in what ways does the "fearless journalism" practiced by Hamedī and Mohammadi extend, radicalise, or depart from the strategies developed by earlier figures such as Sherkat? The third question turns to the state of the field itself and asks what conceptual gaps persist in the existing literature, and why women journalists have so rarely been theorised as producers of resistant knowledge rather than simply as its victims. These are not parallel questions; they are nested ones.

Rationale for the Study and Identified Gaps

The academic case for this research paper rests on three major gaps. The first is the lack of any systematic, gender-sensitive history of Iranian journalism that takes a chronological approach that connects the structural transformations of the post-revolutionary state to the long-term trajectories of women in the media. Existing scholarship, however rich in its specific contributions, has addressed this field but only in fragments. The works of Abrahamian, Keddie, and Paidar provide indispensable foundations for understanding modern Iranian political history and the gendered dimensions of the revolution; Khiabany's analysis of the paradox of Iranian media modernity, and the study by Khiabany and Sreberny of the women's press specifically, offer the most sustained engagement with the question. However, they do not – and could not – account for what has happened since 2022.

The second absence is theoretical. Women journalists in Iran have been extensively studied as objects of repression. In the existing literature, they appear almost exclusively as victims – arrested, silenced, exiled – but rarely as *subjects* of knowledge production. The concept of epistemic resistance, drawn in part from Van Zoonen's feminist media studies framework, offers a way to reframe this: to ask not only what was done to women journalists, but what they did, what they knew, and what forms of knowledge their practice generated and preserved. The articles, interviews, and stories reported by women journalists and publications since 1979 are crucial to understanding the political openings and closings of the regime over the past four decades.

The third absence is conjunctural. The scholarship on the Woman, Life, Freedom movement is still emerging, and existing work on it has focused primarily on its sociological and political dimensions. The specific role of journalistic practice, notably the reporting of Niloofar Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi, has received comparatively little analytical attention. However, their role as reporters uncovering the death of Mahsa Jina Amini and photographing her funeral in Saqqez is essential to the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. They were able to work as journalists because generations of Iranian women have negotiated boundaries and challenged state institutions to preserve a place for women in journalism. Without these decades of negotiating boundaries, Niloofar Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi might not have been able to work as journalists. The 2022 wave of protest that put women's rights at the centre of the contestations against the regime might have unfolded very differently.

Original Research Contribution

This thesis reframes the role of women journalists in recent Iranian history. This project investigates how the role and practices of women journalists in Iran have evolved across successive political and media transformations from 1979 to the post-Woman, Life, Freedom era. It examines the intersection of gender, media regulation, technological change, and political repression to assess how women have shaped and been shaped by the Iranian media landscape. The study focuses on women's participation as both a site of representation and an embodied form of activism, relying on the concepts of **fearless journalism**, **resistance media**, **gendered vulnerability**, and **continuity versus rupture**. By tracing developments from the post-revolution press through reformist publications, digital transitions, and the repressive post-2009 environment, the project analyses how contemporary forms of high-risk, ethically driven journalism emerge and depart from earlier trajectories. The study is limited to a historical and media analysis centred on women journalists as producers of resistance knowledge, bridging feminist theory, media studies, and modern Iranian political history.

The notion of *fearless journalism*, as developed here, is not intended to be rhetorical, but as an analytical paradigm for capturing the specific characteristics of women's journalism under authoritarianism: the necessary articulation of professional ethics, conscious risk, and political

subjectivity. Mobilising this concept requires, in turn, a conversation largely absent from the existing literature, as it brings feminist theory, media studies, and Iranian political history into sustained and mutual dialogue, rather than treating them as separate fields. The periodisation proposed across five structural phases is the result of that conversation: an attempt to map the transformations of women's journalistic practice onto the deeper configurations of state power, regulatory regimes, and gender politics that made them possible or impossible at any given moment. Running through all of this is a single insistence: that the lineage matters. When Niloofar Hamed and Elahe Mohammadi reported Mahsa Jina Amini's death in 2022, their journalism represented both rupture and inheritance – it was a crystallization of practices, networks, and forms of resistance built during the preceding decades.

I. Revolutionary Reconfiguration and Gender Exclusion (1979–1989)

Concepts: State ideology; Gendered Silencing; Structural vulnerability; Institutional exclusion; Islamist gender order

This chapter explores the direct aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the new state quickly imposed its ideology. The new regime rapidly seized control of the press and other media as propaganda tools. The revolutionary period had witnessed a brief flowering of freedom, marked by the proliferation of dailies, newspapers, and diverse political speech. Nevertheless, this opening proved short-lived. Quickly, the press and media institutions were taken over by the Islamic Republic, and society witnessed a sweeping islamisation of the content and speech permitted in the press.

Parallel to this institutional transformation, the regime implemented a systematic exclusion of women from the workplace through both legislative measures and intimidation. Women – especially highly educated women occupying positions as judges, military officers, and journalists – were pushed out of their jobs and back into the home. The women’s press of this period reflects this ideological shift. The pages of women’s magazines embody the emergence of the new Islamic woman.

Introduction

The 1979 Revolution did not only overthrow a monarchy. It reorganised the entire architecture of Iranian public life, including who was permitted to speak, on what terms, and in whose name. The press, as the primary medium of collective speech, became an immediate and urgent target of this reorganisation. What had briefly looked like a moment of pluralism with an efflorescence of dailies, political organs, and independent voices in the months surrounding the revolutionary rupture quickly revealed itself as a transitional interval before the Islamic Republic consolidated its grip on information.

Parallel to this institutional seizure, women were systematically excluded from professional life, a process presented as the restoration of a natural Islamic order. The ideologization of the press and the gendered exclusion of women from the workforce were not coincidental. Rather, they were two faces of the same project. This chapter examines how the Islamic Republic constructed these processes and why the exclusion of women from journalism was inseparable from the broader ideological ambitions of the new regime.

The Islamisation of Media Institutions After the Revolution

The speed with which the Islamic Republic moved to control the press suggests that its leadership understood, from the outset, that information was not a neutral resource but a political instrument. A window of apparent press freedom that opened in early 1979, when Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar invited journalists from *Kayhan* (کیهان), *Ettela'at* (اطلاعات) and several other newspapers to his house, and promised them they could write freely, asking only that they remain mindful of the country’s fragile condition, was always structurally fragile.¹ Freedom granted on the condition of patriotic responsibility is not freedom; it is permission, and permission can be withdrawn. Within months, it was.

¹ Shahidi, H. (2007). *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession*, London: Routledge, 23.

The initial multiplication of publication activity was remarkable. At the time of the Revolution, some one hundred newspapers existed in Iran, twenty-three of which were dailies. Within two years, seven hundred new titles had appeared, many of them openly political, representing the full spectrum of the revolutionary coalition from Islamist and Marxist-Leninist to left-nationalist. The highest circulations still belonged to three pre-revolutionary dailies, *Ettela'at*, *Kayhan*, and *Ayandegan* (آیندگان), run by largely secular staffs who had taken editorial control during the upheaval.² This apparent plurality, however, disguised the deeper structural transformation already underway. Radio and television were the media that actually reached the mass population beyond the literate urban classes. They were both placed immediately under direct state control. The National Iranian Radio and Television Organisation was converted into an ideological apparatus: its output was rapidly Islamicised, its news bulletins purged of coverage of left-wing demonstrations. Besides this drastic change in the content, presenters were increasingly replaced by women willing to appear on screen in full mandatory hijab. As Shahidi documents, few women presenters remained; many chose resignation over compliance. The ban on screening women without a hijab meant that the vast majority of existing films and television series could not be broadcast. Music, except for military marches and revolutionary anthems, was silenced from the airwaves entirely.³

The licensing mechanism became the government's most effective gatekeeper. Of the 358 publications that emerged between the Shah's departure and Iraq's invasion in September 1980, more than 60 percent represented organisations that did not support the Islamic Republic. However, during the new regime's first six months, not a single new publication obtained a printing licence.⁴ The new Press Law provided the formal basis for closure, but its operative terms were deliberately imprecise: applicants for publication licences were required to demonstrate "political piety and moral competence," categories whose meaning the state reserved the right to define. This vagueness was the mechanism itself – a permanent instrument of discretionary control. Over 175 publications were shut down in the Islamic Republic's first three years alone.⁵

At the summit of this system stood Ayatollah Khomeini, who held the power to appoint the directors of national broadcasting and, through them, the editors of *Ettela'at* and *Kayhan*.⁶ The ideological direction he imposed on these institutions was explicit. When he addressed journalists on 15 May 1979, he declared that the press must adhere to the nation's wants. This dictum essentially eradicated the distinction between journalism and propaganda, since what "the nation wants" had already been determined by the revolutionary leadership. The pen, in Khomeini's imagery, was not a tool for exploring reality but a weapon: "If the pen slips," he warned, "the nation will slip." The violence embedded in this vision of journalism, where the journalist is not a witness but a soldier, structured the entire subsequent history of the Iranian press.⁷ Mohammad Khatami, supervisor of *Kayhan* in the early 1980s, made the logic explicit when he defined the role of the press as amplifying the views of the people, then clarified that "the people's views are identical to those of Islam and Imam Khomeini."⁸ To report was to confirm the propaganda; to investigate was to betray the ideology of the Islamic Republic.

² Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran*.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶ Abrahamian, E. (2007). *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 229; see also Nikki R. Keddie (2006). *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, updated ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 257.

⁷ Menashri, D. (2001). *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London: Routledge, 134.

⁸ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics*, 134.

What this meant in practice was that the function of the press shifted entirely from investigation to consolidation. This did not mean the consolidation of facts, but the consolidation of a new revolutionary narrative. The government replaced the Pahlavi mythology of monarchical grandeur with an Islamic counter-mythology of the *umma*, the community of the faithful, in which glorious Islamic heritage replaced the glorious heritage of kings as the orienting story of Iranian history.⁹ The press was tasked with naturalising this substitution, insulating it from external challenge, and presenting it as the authentic voice of the people. This was not journalism, but as Khomeini himself put it without embarrassment, a school of teaching.¹⁰

This ideological project was gendered from the beginning. The pen, in Khomeini's vision, was a masculine instrument of power. Women's exclusion from journalism was written into the logic of that restructuring from the start.

Purges, Moral Regulation, and the Body as Battleground

The first years after the Revolution saw systematic purges of media institutions and professional workplaces, more broadly. These purges were not conducted according to neutral professional criteria. Instead, they operated through a distinctly gendered logic that took into account gender, relationship to the veil, and political affiliation. Waves of dismissals, forced resignations, and departures swept through newsrooms between 1979 and 1982.

The exclusion of women from professional life in the years following the Revolution was conducted through a layered system of legal decree, physical regulation, and ideological intimidation that took the body of the woman worker as its central site of intervention. What is striking, in retrospect, is how unprepared professional women were for the scale and speed of what followed. The educated, urban women who had entered the workforce in increasing numbers through the 1960s and 1970s – among them judges, military officers, civil servants, and journalists – did not initially take seriously the hints in clerical speeches about forced veiling and the abrogation of the Family Protection Act.¹¹ It was difficult to imagine that the gains of the pre-revolutionary period could be erased so swiftly by a revolution that had itself mobilised women in enormous numbers.

The first confrontation came in early March 1979, when women arriving at their workplaces were told to don the hijab before entering.¹² Many refused. Between five thousand and eight thousand women demonstrated against Khomeini's ruling, gathering outside the Foreign Ministry, at Tehran University, and across the capital.¹³ The demonstrations received wide coverage in the Western press, but they received close to none in Iranian national broadcasting. The decision to silence these events was made by Sadeq Qotbzadeh, director of national radio and television.¹⁴ The very first major act of organised feminist resistance in the post-revolutionary period was thus systematically erased from the public record by the institutions whose function was to inform that public. Women journalists in particular were silenced by their own institutional infrastructure and at the precise moment they were trying to alert the public to the dangers of the systematic gender-based exclusion¹⁵ that the new government was putting in place.

⁹ Khiabany, G. (2010). *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity*, London: Routledge, 18.

¹⁰ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics*, 134.

¹¹ Sanasarian, E. (1982). *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini*, New York: Praeger.

¹² Moghadam, V. (1988). "Women, Work, and Ideology in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 20(2), 225.

¹³ Sanasarian, *Women's Rights Movement*, 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁵ The concept of "gender apartheid" gained prominence in the late 1990s as a term used to

The legal machinery of exclusion moved quickly. On 3 March 1979, women judges were barred from the bench on the grounds that Islam did not permit women to adjudicate.¹⁶ On 6 March, women serving compulsory military terms were dismissed from the armed forces.¹⁷ A large number of women across the civil service were dismissed for non-compliance with Islamic dress codes. Others were pressured into resignation or early retirement through financial incentives specifically designed to make professional work economically irrational for married women. The logic was clear: the Islamic Republic did not need to formally prohibit women from working if it could make working sufficiently costly. Domestic work or badly paid informal employment became, for many women, the only practical alternatives. Moghadam's analysis of this period captures the structural dimension of this shift. The massive propaganda campaign to drive women out of office jobs, combined with legal and institutional mechanisms, was not incidental to post-revolutionary economic policy but was, in part, a response to the unemployment crisis – a crisis that could be partially resolved by removing women from the formal labour market.¹⁸

On 22 July 1980, all co-educational schools were abolished, with teaching segregated and women teachers assigned to girls' schools and men to boys' schools.¹⁹ The Islamists argued that male heads of department must replace female secretaries. These spatial arrangements functioned as mechanisms of control and marginalisation. When women were confined to separate spaces, they were effectively removed from informal networks where editorial decisions were made, where news judgment was debated, and where career advancement was negotiated.

The dress code was both a practical instrument of exclusion and a symbolic declaration about the nature of the Islamic order. Although no legislation had been enacted to make veiling compulsory in the early months of the Revolution, social harassment and strict office regulations made compliance effectively mandatory. By July 1980, after months of what Poya describes as a bitter struggle by secular urban women, the *hijab eslami* was officially required: the *roposh*, trousers, thick stockings, and *maghnae*, in black, grey, or dark brown.²⁰ Women who did not comply were dismissed; those who replaced them on television screens appeared in full Islamic dress. The media, having already erased women's protests, was now deployed as an enforcement mechanism accusing women who refused compliance of communist or capitalist sympathies, framing their bodily autonomy as political treason.

The ideological underpinning of this regulation was the regime's position that the female body was inherently disruptive to the social order. Women's presence, their movement, the tone of their voice, the colour of their clothing, were all understood as capable of arousing men and undermining the conditions for proper Islamic governance. The hijab was presented not as oppression but as protection,²¹ a necessary shield against the dangerous sexualisation attributed to the female body. This logic, which objectified women in order to justify their regulation, had a direct consequence for the professional life of women: their bodies became the battleground on which the government's claims to Islamic authenticity were inscribed and enforced. The censorship of the 1980s was as much a censorship of the body and how women appeared, moved, and presented themselves in professional space as it was a censorship of content.

describe systematic and institutionalized discrimination against women.

¹⁶ Poya, M. (1999). *Women, Work, and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran*, London: Zed Books, 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ Moghadam, W. (1985). "Women, State, and Ideology in Iran", *Third World Quarterly*, 7(2), 260, retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436598508419838>.

¹⁹ Poya, *Women, Work, and Islamism*, 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ Afshar, H. (1985). "Women, State, and Ideology in Iran", *Third World Quarterly*, 7(2), 266.

The Gendered Restructuring of Journalistic Labour

The reorganisation of media institutions along Islamic ideological lines was accompanied by a systematic restructuring of journalistic labour that confined women to certain categories of coverage, excluded them from others, and reserved positions of editorial authority almost exclusively for men. This restructuring was not presented as discrimination. It was legitimised through a vision of women's nature and capacities that positioned them as inherently suited for the domestic, familial, and educational domains, and unsuited to the harder and more dangerous subjects of political, judicial, and international reporting.

The justification drawn on by leading clerics was consistent: Western modernity had forced women out of their "natural and humane domestic environment" and into offices and factories.²² The implicit premise was that journalism required qualities that women lacked. Women were concentrated on what might be called the feminine beats: family life, health, education, women's issues defined in the narrowest possible terms. The reorganisation of working conditions reinforced this confinement. Working days were extended from five to six days per week²³, a change with particularly severe consequences for women with children, making professional journalism structurally incompatible with the type of motherhood that the regime simultaneously designated as women's primary duty. The contradiction was deliberate: the Islamic Republic needed women to be mothers, but refused to provide childcare; it needed women to remain in the workforce to sustain a war-torn economy, but refused to give them meaningful professional roles. As Poya argues, the regime faced genuinely conflicting ideological, economic, and political pressures on the question of women's employment and resolved the contradiction not by choosing between them but by maintaining both simultaneously, leaving women suspended in structural precarity.²⁴

The editorial hierarchies that emerged from this reorganisation were strikingly gendered. Women almost never appeared in editor-in-chief positions, rarely as section editors, and only occasionally in mid-level editorial roles. The statistics Bonakdarian assembles for the period are stark: women were one-eighth as likely as men to obtain jobs open to both sexes. Only six percent of public sector jobs across the country were formally open to women.²⁵ Most organisations with vacancies did not employ women at all. In media institutions, the newsroom was remade as a space of exclusively masculine authority, aligned with the broader ideological logic of Islamic governance, which positioned the male household head as the natural locus of decision-making in both the family and the state.

The promotion of domesticity through the women's press reinforced this exclusion at the level of culture and aspiration. *Zan-e Ruz* (زن روز), the regime-affiliated women's weekly, ran sustained campaigns presenting marriage as a religious duty that "cures almost all social and personal problems," describing domesticity as women's "holy war" in the tradition of the Prophet.²⁶ The articles counselled young women to marry regardless of economic circumstances, advised readers who remained single that "too much education" had made them "too highbrow,"²⁷ and equated professional ambition with a kind of moral deficiency. In 1972, the same newspaper had published articles which depicted marriage as a positively dangerous occupation for young women. By 1984, as the editorial line shifted, the unmarried woman had been transformed in

²² Hashemi Rafsanjani, quoted in Afshar, *Women, State, and Ideology*, 259.

²³ Paidar, P. (1995). *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 170–171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 174 (citing *Zan-e Ruz* surveys).

²⁶ *Zan-e Ruz* – 14 July 1984, quoted in Afshar, *Women, State, and Ideology*, 270.

²⁷ *Zan-e Ruz* – 7 July 1984, quoted in Afshar, *Women, State, and Ideology*, 272.

official discourse from a figure of personal freedom into something approaching a figure of social danger. Ayatollah Moussavi Bouroujerdi claimed that most political prisoners were unmarried and that freedom from marital responsibilities had made young people “vulnerable to false ideas.”²⁸ The trajectory from professional woman to dissident was, in this vision, depressingly short.

This ideological campaign reveals something important about the nature of women’s exclusion from journalism: it was not merely about labour market control. Women were understood not simply as workers competing for positions but as symbolic markers of the nation’s Islamic character and cultural purity, a formulation that Moghadam, Poya, and Afshar all identify – although from different angles – as central to post-revolutionary gender ideology. Controlling women’s presence in the media was equivalent, in this logic, to protecting the integrity of the nation itself.²⁹ A woman journalist who appeared on television without the hijab, who reported on political affairs, who exercised editorial authority represented a visible threat to the Islamic authenticity the regime was constructing. This symbolic dimension explains why the exclusion was so total, so systematic, and so extraordinarily resistant to the economic and practical arguments for keeping women in the workforce.

Consequences: Invisibility, Authority, and the Creation of Alternative Spaces

The cumulative effect of purges, moral regulation, and the gendered restructuring of journalistic labour was the near-total disappearance of the woman journalist from the Iranian public media landscape. The bylines that had, in the pre-revolutionary period, appeared across a range of coverage now became vanishingly rare. The figure who had reported on political conflict, investigated institutional corruption, and maintained a genuine, if limited, presence while exercising critical judgment over public affairs during the Pahlavi period was effectively erased from the mainstream press. This erasure was not merely symbolic. The invisibility of women journalists within media institutions was constitutive of a form of structural vulnerability. As they were confined to peripheral roles and excluded from editorial decision-making, they were denied opportunities to amplify their expertise.

In the 1980s, systematic institutional exclusion forced women journalists to find creative alternatives that would have lasting consequences. Women who could not work within mainstream media found – or created – spaces alongside it. Shahla Lahiji, the first woman publisher in Iran, is perhaps the most striking example of this strategic reconversion, also called “clandestine creativity.”³⁰ Unable to work as a journalist within the constraints of state-controlled media, she founded *Roshangaran Publishing* (روشنگران) in 1985 and used it to create what she described as a women’s studies institution, a space where women could organise, write, and publish on the issues that mainstream journalism refused to address. Lahiji’s account of her work in this period captures both the difficulty and the determination it required: “I worked consistently to create an opportunity for women’s voices to be heard.” The scarcity of paper, rationed like all commodities during the war, was one material obstacle among many. She navigated them all. Other women underwent similar reconversions. Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh would go on to edit *Farzaneh* feminist magazine; Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani would establish

²⁸ *Zan-e Ruz* – 18 August 1984, quoted in Afshar, *Women, State, and Ideology*, 270.

²⁹ Khiabany, G. and Sreberny, A. (2004). “The Women’s Press in Contemporary Iran: Engendering the Public

Sphere,” in *Women and the Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression*, ed. Naomi Sakr, London: I.B. Tauris; see also Moghadam, “Women, Work, and Ideology,” 228, and Afshar, *Women, State, and Ideology*, 266.

³⁰ Povey, E.R. (2001). “Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran,” *Feminist Review*, 69(1), 47.

Jens-e Dovom (جنس دوم) and direct *Nashre-e Towsee* (نشر توسعه) women's publishing house.³¹ These were not retreats from journalism but attempts to do – through alternative institutional forms – what the mainstream press refused to publish.

Alongside these institutional innovations, informal networks among women journalists and intellectuals became increasingly important. As Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani later explained, professional women, including lawyers, journalists, academics, and parliamentarians found themselves compelled to “leave aside their differences and respond to pressure from below,” forming cross-professional solidarities that transcended any single institution or political affiliation.³² These networks were largely invisible in the official record, but they were the infrastructure through which women's intellectual and professional life was sustained through the most repressive decade of the Islamic Republic. They also, crucially, established the foundations for what would come next. The women's press of the 1990s, the reformist politics of the Khatami years, and the emergence of Islamic feminism were recognised as intellectual currents, but none of these would have been possible without the clandestine networks and creative reconversions that women journalists built in the margins of the 1980s. Khiabany and Sreberny have noted that the history of debates about women's rights in Iran cannot be separated from the history of the press.³³ What that observation points toward is that the women journalists of the 1980s were not simply casualties of exclusion. They were, in the margins and in the face of systematic silencing, actively laying the groundwork for the contestation that would follow.

Conclusion

The decade from 1979 to 1989 was foundational for the entire subsequent history of women journalists in Iran, not only because of what it destroyed but because of what its very destructiveness forced into being. The exclusion of women from journalism during this period was the outcome of a deliberate and coherent ideological project in which the reconstruction of media institutions, the regulation of women's bodies and labour, and the establishment of an Islamic gender order were inseparable dimensions of a single political ambition. Women were not marginalised as an unintended consequence of institutional reorganisation; their marginalisation was the point. Their bodies were the terrain on which the Islamic Republic's claims to authenticity were written and enforced; and their professional silencing was the price paid for a new national narrative that had no room for women as speaking subjects in the public sphere.

And yet, the decade also demonstrates something that institutional power consistently underestimates: that exclusion generates its own forms of resistance. The women who were pushed out of newsrooms and into publishing houses organised informal networks, created alternative publishing spaces, and laid the institutional foundations for magazines that would later become platforms for the most significant gender debates of the following decades. They were not simply surviving the 1980s. They were, in Shahla Sherkat's phrase, “hiding fire under ash”. The structures of constraint and the structures of creative resistance that the 1980s established would shape everything that followed.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Khiabany, G. and Sreberny, A. (2004). “The Women's Press in Contemporary Iran: Engendering the Public Sphere”, in Sakr, N. ed. (2004). *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power Through Self-Expression*, London: I.B. Tauris.

II. Reformist Overtures and Feminist Insider Journalism (1990s)

Concepts: *Reformist opening; Press pluralism; Islamic feminism; Insider journalism; Gendered political agency; Conservative backlash*

Introduction

The decade between the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the turn of the millennium was one of the most contradictory in the history of the Islamic Republic. The government that had spent the 1980s consolidating its ideological hold over Iranian society found itself confronted, in the 1990s, with forces it had itself set in motion: a literate, urbanised, and politically conscious population whose demands could no longer be managed by the instruments of the revolutionary decade. Women, who had been systematically expelled from positions of authority and confined to the domestic sphere and to peripheral professional roles, had not disappeared from public life. They returned to it changed by the experience of exclusion, more determined and better organised than before. The press became the primary terrain on which these transformations were fought. This chapter examines how the partial opening of the public sphere under Rafsanjani and Khatami created conditions for the emergence of a feminist press that would, over a decade, fundamentally reshape the terms of gender debate in Iran, and how that press was eventually met with a conservative response that sought to reassert the boundaries it had spent a decade dissolving.

The Reformist Press and the Partial Opening of the Public Sphere

The Rafsanjani Presidency and the Beginning of Economic and Cultural Opening

The political landscape that emerged after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 was structurally different from what had preceded it. The revolutionary charisma that had held the state together through a decade of war and internal repression could not be inherited; it could only be replaced by institutional authority. As Brumberg³⁴ observes, "henceforth, authority no longer rested in the hands of a manifestly charismatic man," and the 1989 Constitution institutionalised this shift by dividing authority between a *faqih* deriving legitimacy from a traditional religious office and a president whose authority derived from a modern legal-rational institution. This constitutional arrangement was not simply a technical adjustment. It was the structural precondition for the reformist politics of the 1990s, because it created, for the first time, a space within the system in which competing claims to authority could be articulated and contested.

Rafsanjani entered this space as a pragmatist. His electoral platform in 1989 was built on the promise of a "decade of reconstruction" that would extricate Iran from the economic devastation of eight years of war and improve the lives of the *mostazafin* (مستضعفان).³⁵ He announced a revised Five-Year Plan, calling for the expansion of the private sector through the privatisation of public assets, the repatriation of capital, and the promotion of foreign investment.³⁶ The economic philosophy underlying this programme represented a significant departure from the revolutionary era's suspicion of markets and expertise. The composition of the ruling elite began to reflect this shift, with cabinet ministers becoming increasingly better educated. Rafsanjani's argument was

³⁴ Brumberg, D. (2001). *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 150.

³⁵ Menashri, D. (2001). *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London: Routledge, 64.

³⁶ Brumberg. *Reinventing Khomeini*, 155.

that bad economic policies created self-inflicted poverty, and that the only exit from this condition was production-driven growth backed by reduced bureaucratic inefficiency.

The consequences for women's professional lives were real but unintended. The exigencies of post-war reconstruction pulled women back into the workforce at precisely the moment the ideological campaign for their domestic confinement had seemed most complete.³⁷ During the war itself, the enormous toll on male lives had already forced practical compromises. Women had staffed laundries and kitchens servicing the front, served as nurses in military hospitals, and been given a more pronounced civilian profile in government offices. Child-care centres, initially denounced as imperialist plots to separate mothers from their children, were quietly reframed as social necessities³⁸ enabling mothers to perform their services with a peace of mind. The reconstruction period consolidated this reintegration by economic necessity: women whose financial contribution had become essential were compelled to participate in the labour force, and many educated women who had been "purified" from their posts in the early revolutionary period seized the opportunity to reclaim them.³⁹ Rafsanjani had promised economic rehabilitation and partially delivered it. By the time women returned to professional life, they had accumulated a political consciousness and developed networks that the press of the 1990s would give a platform to for the first time.

Khatami's Election in 1997: Reformist Hope and Its Consequences for the Press

The election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency on 23 May 1997 was a major turning point. The landslide margin of his victory was not merely an electoral result. It was, as Menashri⁴⁰ argues, "a signal of popular demand for reform" and simultaneously "a sign of protest against societal conditions, the ruling conservative elite and rigid official dogma," as well as a yearning for greater pragmatism and liberalisation. Understanding why Khatami won requires understanding the society that elected him, because the conditions that produced his victory were the same conditions that would sustain and eventually exhaust the feminist press that flourished under his presidency.

Iran in the mid-1990s was a young, urbanised, and increasingly educated society, whose expectations the revolutionary system had systematically failed to meet. During the 1980s the population had grown by a staggering average of 2.8 percent per year, jumping from 39 million to 56 million. By 1995, roughly half of the country's 60.5 million people had been born after the Islamic Revolution.⁴¹ Tehran's population alone had grown from four million to seven million between 1980 and 1990. The literacy data are equally striking: between 1980 and 1991 the percentage of literate women leaped from 30 percent to 59 percent, a transformation with profound political implications. As Brumberg notes, the government found itself confronting "an increasingly mobilised and politically conscious population," and the process of social mobilisation was particularly marked among women, many of whom became "even more determined to remedy their political, economic, and cultural disenfranchisement,"⁴² and played an increasingly important role in the reform movement of the 1990s. The Islamic Republic had invested in female literacy and education as instruments of its own legitimacy. It had produced, instead, the constituency that would vote overwhelmingly for Khatami and sustain the feminist press through a decade of contestation.

³⁷ Kian, A. (1997). "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 24(1), 82.

³⁸ Najmabadi, A. (1991). "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, the State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti, London: Macmillan, 81.

³⁹ Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran" 83.

⁴⁰ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 78.

⁴¹ Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, 188.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 189.

Khatami's rhetorical strategy was to make his reformist agenda appear continuous with, rather than opposed to, the revolutionary legacy, framing it as consonant with Khomeini's "greatest legacy, the establishment of Islamic government"⁴³ in order to dilute opposition from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. His platform was simultaneously ideologically anchored and practically oriented: he advocated social liberalisation, political tolerance, greater rights for women, and the rule of law. He called explicitly to "do away with male supremacy" and declared that "men are not in charge of the women." His personal history as Minister of Islamic Guidance from 1982 to 1992, a tenure widely regarded as a relative "golden age for Iranian culture and intellectual pursuits" during which he encouraged filmmakers, eased constraints on publications, and expanded the list of foreign publications permitted in the country, distinguished him sharply from the conservative establishment. He was described by contemporary observers not as an "average mullah" but as a president "with one foot in Western civilisation," a figure who "diverged to a large extent" from the worldview governing the ruling system.⁴⁴ For women in particular, Khatami symbolised hope. The question was whether that hope could be converted into institutional change.

The immediate consequences of his election for the press were transformative. Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani eased restrictions on publication, allowing a wave of reformist newspapers to open. In the absence of organised political parties, the press became the centre of political debate, hosting extensive discussions about civil society, tolerance, the rule of law, the position of women, and competing interpretations of *velayat-e faqih*.⁴⁵ Khatami's greatest achievement, as Keddie argues, was helping to popularise the idea of democracy and making the government somewhat more open, with expanded media and public debate bringing discussions about the rule of law and civil society into mainstream Iranian intellectual life. The press was not simply reporting on these debates. It was producing them, and in producing them, it was producing the conditions for the feminist journalism that would define the decade.

The Multiplication of Press Titles: A Monitored but Real Pluralism

The press landscape that emerged between Khatami's election and the crackdown of 2000 was unlike anything Iran had seen since the revolutionary moment of 1979. At no other time in Iran – and as Menashri⁴⁶ argues, nowhere else in the Middle East – had there been so many new papers and journals "enjoying such a degree of freedom and expressing such a diversity of viewpoints with such fervour and sense of mission." By 1999 it seemed as though almost all the taboos had been removed, with the most critical issues, domestic and foreign, debated openly, including the basic principles of the system of government and relations with the United States. Publications such as *Jame'eh* (جامعه), *Zan* (زن), *Tous* (توس), *Neshat* (نشاط), *Khordad* (خرداد), and *Asr-e Azadegan* (عصر آزادگان) voiced harsh criticism and expressed independent views, with some even questioning basic revolutionary principles hitherto considered untouchable.⁴⁷

This pluralism was real, but it was also structurally fragile. The government occasionally banned papers that crossed an undefined line, and the Revolutionary Guards commander Rahim Safavi warned in 1998 that violence would be used if necessary to purge what he called "the unfaithful elements in the press," characterizing segments of the press as "nests in which anti-revolutionaries flourished."⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch observed that "a large part of the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁴ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 82.

⁴⁵ Keddie, N.R. (2006). *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, updated ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 281.

⁴⁶ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 325.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

government's mechanisms of control and censorship falls outside the law,"⁴⁹ with the government employing methods of intimidation that required no judicial procedure. No judicial or political institution furnished any binding definition of what constituted a political crime, which meant that the threat of prosecution was always available as an instrument of deterrence, regardless of whether prosecution was actually pursued. As the reformist newspaper *Hamshahri* (همشهری) complained, journalists operated in a permanent condition of legal uncertainty, never knowing which specific act of journalism would be deemed criminal until the verdict arrived.

The pattern of closure that emerged was itself revealing. When *Jame'eh* was shut down, its editorial board published *Tous*. When *Tous* was closed, they moved to *Neshat*, and then to *Asr-e Azadegan* and *Akhbar-e Eqtesad* (اخبار اقتصاد), retaining the same team, the same format, and the same editorial line throughout.⁵⁰ This capacity for institutional reconstitution was itself a form of resistance, exploiting the gap between the government's power to withdraw a specific licence and its inability to prevent the same journalists from immediately applying for a new one. Conservatives eventually closed this gap by amending the press law to prohibit banned periodicals from reappearing under different names⁵¹, but for several years the reformist press demonstrated a resilience that the government had not anticipated. As Menashri puts it, there were "signs of resilience and even vitality"⁵² in intellectual life that the system's mechanisms of control could contain but not extinguish.

The crackdown intensified after the April 2000 Berlin Conference on the future of reform in Iran, which conservatives used as the pretext for a systematic assault on the reformist press. The attempted assassination of Said Hajjarian, presidential advisor and publisher of *Sobh-e Emrooz* (صبح امروز), was the most dramatic signal of conservative determination to roll back the openings of the Khatami years.⁵³ Over twenty newspapers and journals were banned in the period following the conference.

Khatami, as Keddie⁵⁴ documents, was able to influence foreign and economic policy, but ultimately could not safeguard press and other freedoms against a conservative judiciary and a Revolutionary Guards establishment that operated outside his control. The reformist wave had crested. What it left behind, however, was not simply its own ruins. It had created a generation of journalists, a body of published debate, and an organized women's movement whose intellectual and political resources would outlast the specific institutional conditions that had enabled them.

The Emergence of Zanan and Women's and Feminist Publications

The Return of Women Professionals and Access to Higher Education

The founding of *Zanan* in February 1992 was not simply the launch of a new publication. It was a declaration – quiet in its form but radical in its implications – that the terms imposed on women's journalism by the Islamic Republic were negotiable. After a decade in which the women's press had functioned primarily as a relay for state ideology, promoting domesticity, motherhood, and Islamic propriety, *Zanan* proposed something categorically different: a magazine that took women's issues as a core subject and that did so from within the very institutional and discursive framework the regime had constructed. This double positioning was working inside the system and against it. It was a strategy, and understanding it is essential to understanding what *Zanan*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵¹ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 313.

⁵² Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 136.

⁵³ Khiabany, G. (2010). *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity*, London: Routledge, 111.

⁵⁴ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 334.

accomplished until its forced closure in 2008.

The emergence of a feminist press in the 1990s was not only the product of political opening. It was made possible by the gradual return of women to professional life after a decade of systematic exclusion. The post-war reconstruction period created contradictory conditions that the government had not fully anticipated. The economic necessity pulled women back into the workforce at precisely the moment the state was attempting to consolidate their domestic confinement. As Kian⁵⁵ documents, the implementation of reconstruction policies resulted in the return of secular women professionals who had been dismissed from their posts during the revolutionary period, with many educated women seizing the opportunity to regain their posts while others joined professional activity for financial reasons. In contrast to fifty women journalists in 1972, by 1997, there were four hundred working across various publications, their proportion rising from 2.5 percent to 14 percent over twenty-five years. As Khiabany⁵⁶ notes, these women were younger than their predecessors but better educated. While the average proportion of journalists holding a university degree stood at 35 percent across the profession, among women journalists this figure reached 50 percent. The feminist press of the 1990s was built by this generation, educated under the Islamic Republic, shaped by its literacy campaigns and educational investments into the very subjects it most feared.

Zanan (1992–2008): Creation, Editorial Line, and Positioning

Zanan was born from a rupture. After a decade editing *Zan-e Ruz* at the Kayhan Institute, pushing the publication in an increasingly feminist direction, Shahla Sherkat was dismissed for promoting what her employers termed modernist, westernised, and feminist tendencies.⁵⁷ She converted the rupture into a founding act: in February 1992, as sole owner and licence-holder, she launched *Zanan* with a degree of editorial independence her previous position had not permitted. The genealogy is significant. As Tajali notes, two of the post-revolutionary period's most outspoken women's periodicals, *Zanan* and *Huquq-e Zanan* (هوکوک زنان), were both managed by women who had previously edited *Zan-e Ruz*, the weekly published by the Kayhan Institute.⁵⁸

The fact that, as Najmabadi⁵⁹ has observed, “Islamist hardliners produce a lineage of feminist editors” speaks to the fluidity of Iranian political and ideological developments and to women's agency in boldly highlighting women's rights concerns even within conservative and patriarchal institutional contexts. The Islamic Republic, in its attempt to domesticate the women's press, had trained the editors who would eventually question its foundations.

The editorial line Sherkat constructed rested on a single, audacious premise: that the inequality between men and women in Iranian law was not initiated by the Quran but by the historically contingent interpretations of religious authorities whose ideas on women were “probably shaped by the examples of their own wives or female relatives whom they generalised to the entire female population.”⁶⁰ This was not a secular argument but a theological one. Sherkat was explicit about the program: “Radical legal changes are needed to solve women's problems. Many articles of the civil code are based on the Shari'a, which must, therefore, be reinterpreted. Moreover, women

⁵⁵ Kian, “Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran”, 83.

⁵⁶ Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 206.

⁵⁷ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 304; Tajali, M. (2023). “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Role of Women's Magazines,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Loubna H. Skalli and Nahed Eltantawy, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 208.

⁵⁸ Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Role of Women's Magazines”.

⁵⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi (2000), quoted in Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 208.

⁶⁰ Kian, “Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran”, 92.

should be involved in this undertaking. Our understanding of religion varies in each historical period, and religious interpretations should account for factors of time and space.”⁶¹ The claim being made was not that Islamic law was wrong. It was that the men who had interpreted it had been wrong, and that women were entitled to participate in its reinterpretation. This was a claim the government’s clerical establishment could not easily dismiss on doctrinal grounds, because it was framed entirely within the tradition it invoked.

The magazine has been identified by scholars as Islamic in form and reformist in substance, in other words, a hybrid space. In the same pages, the readers of *Zanan* could find quotes from the Quran, publications written by clerics, and contributions from secular lawyers and academics who engaged openly with Western feminist thought. As prominent human rights lawyer Mehranguiz Kar documents it, the theoretical framework defended by *Zanan* was based on the scriptural Quranic principle that God created woman and man equally and gave value and virtue to both. One major point of the editorial line is its insistence on the temporality and secularity (*asri shodan*) of religion. Rather than a fixed divine decree, religious interpretations were defended by the magazine as historically conditioned by human reasoning.

The magazine also had a deliberately broad popular register that expanded its reach far beyond explicitly feminist circles. Alongside its rigorous legal and theological articles, it covered rhinoplasty, fashion, cooking, and well-being. It profiled athletes and novelists alongside Nobel laureates and imprisoned activists. *Zanan* made its readers aware of central women’s rights concerns and their accomplishments in cinema, politics, and sport, without, as Mona Tajali puts it, “overly infuriating the mullahs.”⁶² The calculated coexistence of the banal and the political within the same pages was a form of normalization: a young woman who bought *Zanan* for its beauty advice would find herself reading, in the same issue, a rigorous legal analysis of custody law or a testimonial from a survivor of domestic violence. Sherkat later reflected that before *Zanan*, the term “feminism” had a pejorative connotation in Iran, and that the magazine, by finding its place among other media, popularized feminist ideas to the point where women were “no longer afraid to proclaim loud and clear their rights.”

Shahla Sherkat as a Central Editorial Figure

Understanding *Zanan* requires exploring the particular vision of Sherkat’s editorial practice. She described her approach with characteristic precision: “Many times my writers or readers asked me to put something in the magazine and I sat down and measured the costs and the benefits of printing something. Sometimes you print something that is of extreme value, meaning that it has a very positive impact on the reader and that one piece does great work in society. I may decide to do that even if it leads to the closure of the magazine. But many times, one weighs the costs and benefits and sees it may not be worth causing problems for a 10-year-old publication that may live for another 10 years.” Instead of employing a rhetoric of compromise, Sherkat speaks strategically emphasizes the importance of having a voice and preserving the ability to use it.

What Sherkat built at *Zanan* was what she herself called *feminisme bomi*, an indigenous feminism rooted in the social and cultural specificities of Iran rather than imported wholesale from Western frameworks. She explained: “I prefer to use the term *feminisme bomi*, indigenous feminism, because it relates women’s rights issues to the social and cultural specifics of Iran. For example, at present, we may not be able to raise the issue of abortion in our society. But we could raise the issue of women’s rights to have control over their sexuality and fertility. This is a very important issue in a society where the traditional interpretation of the Islamic law gives a man the right to have sexual relations with his wife

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶² Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 212.

and to make decisions on when and how many children he may want to have. The wife has to obey his wishes.⁶³ There was a form of tactical realism that allowed *Zanan* to occupy the public space that a more openly confrontational publication would have been denied.

This indigenous feminism was constitutively pluralist. Sherkat explicitly framed the magazine as a meeting ground for women of all orientations, insisting that “we should tolerate and respect each other’s convictions. Even though we do not share the same philosophy, belief and thought, we can and should work together.”⁶⁴ The solidarities this openness produced were historically significant: as Islamist women editors acknowledged in the period, their sectarian positions of the first post-revolutionary years had led to “the isolation of many competent seculars, which was to the detriment of all women.”⁶⁵ The willingness to reckon with that failure, and to build cross-ideological alliances in its wake, was one of the founding gestures of the feminist press of the 1990s. Through their writings and interviews, secular lawyers, economists, sociologists, artists, historians, and novelists who were denied the right to publish their own magazines seized the opportunity to present their opinions and raise demands for equal rights through *Zanan*’s pages. The magazine functioned as an institutional substitute for an entire range of publications that the government had made impossible.

Topics Covered: The Full Spectrum of Women’s Lives

The range of subjects *Zanan* addressed across its 153 issues constituted a sustained argument about the scope of journalism itself. The content that most provoked traditionalists was precisely what mattered the most: alongside demands for legal reform, the magazine published reports on women’s mistreatment by their husbands, the dramatic stories of women divorced without consent, women unable to obtain guardianship of their children after divorce, and accounts of salary and status disparities in the workplace. As Kian⁶⁶ documents, the aim of these magazines was to promote women’s status by emphasising legal, social, and economic shortcomings and proposing changes in civil and penal laws, employment legislation, and constitutional law. *Zanan* aimed simultaneously at the educated woman and the political and religious elite, understanding that legal change required both popular awareness and elite persuasion. Tayyibeh Iskandari, the editor of one sister publication, described the readership dynamic precisely: “Although it is women who buy these magazines, they take them home and their husbands read them too. A lot of men contact us to criticise us for the articles we publish, but it also happens that some make suggestions on how to improve the condition of women.”⁶⁷ The feminist press was not only talking to women. It was reshaping the terms of gender debate across Iranian society.

Zanan as a Laboratory for Feminist Insider Journalism

The most consequential intellectual contribution *Zanan* made to Iranian feminist discourse was the systematic deployment of Islamic jurisprudence against the legal structures that used that same jurisprudence to justify women’s exclusion. The strategy was not simply to argue that Islamic law should be reformed. It was to demonstrate, from within the tradition, that existing legal prohibitions on women had no genuine scriptural foundation and represented not divine will but patriarchal convention dressed in religious authority. In November and December 1992,

⁶³ Povey, E.R. (2001). “Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran,” *Feminist Review*, 69(1).

⁶⁴ Kian, “Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran”, 91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

shortly after its launch, *Zanan* published a series of articles examining the obstacles to women's authority in religious and judicial institutions, maintaining that none of the main Islamic texts justified such prohibitions, that no consensus existed among religious authorities on the issue, and that in the past, several women in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world had reached the summit of religious authority.⁶⁸ The conclusion was uncompromising: "A man has no natural privilege over a woman. If a man can become a judge so can a woman, and if a man can become a source of imitation, so can a woman."⁶⁹ This argument, made in a women's magazine rather than a clerical journal, was a provocation of the first order. It did not attack the Islamic system. It claimed the system's own authority for women.

The figure most associated with this theological strategy inside *Zanan*'s pages was Mohsen Sa'idzadeh⁷⁰, a cleric who contributed regularly to the magazine, initially under pseudonyms.⁷¹ In issues four and five, Sa'idzadeh outlined the various clerical positions on whether women could serve as judges, highlighting the absence of consensus in Shi'i Islam on the question. His early clerical contributions quickly evolved into formal dialogues between religious scholars and secular feminists such as Mehranguiz Kar, in which the latter posed questions about the discriminations women faced that were justified through a reference to Islam, and the former attempted to answer from within the tradition. The format itself was a political act: it placed a cleric and a secular lawyer in conversation as intellectual equals, on the pages of a women's magazine, on questions that had previously been the exclusive preserve of male clerical authority.

Publishing this material required the particular editorial practice that Sherkat had developed into a method. The lawyer Mehranguiz Kar's account of her experience is illuminating. Sa'idzadeh told her she could make her article publishable by removing or amending words and sentences that might result in blasphemy charges. Sherkat asked her permission to omit the introductory section arguing that universal human rights should be the basis of legislation. Kar consented to both changes because she "realised that this was a historic occasion."⁷² What this exchange reveals is the daily texture of feminist insider journalism at *Zanan*: a constant negotiation between the full version of an argument and the publishable version, between what needed to be said and what could survive the Press Court and censorship. The remarkable thing is not that these negotiations were necessary. It is that they produced, year after year, journalism of lasting political consequence.

Zanan's laboratory function extended beyond theological debate to systematic coverage of women's political and legal situation. Sherkat appointed Zahra Ebrahimi, a seasoned journalist, to prepare monthly reports on parliamentary proceedings related to women, introducing key legislators and their positions to a readership that had no other reliable source of this information.⁷³ This parliamentary journalism was not only informational. It was strategic: by making visible the specific deputies who were blocking or advancing women's rights legislation, the magazine enhanced the capacity of women's rights groups to lobby and engage with their female representatives. In the run-up to the 2001 presidential elections, *Zanan* intensified its direct pressure on Khatami, with contributor Noushin Tarighi posing the direct question of whether his election in 1997 had been made possible by the exceptional voter turnout of women

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁹ Yadigar-Azadi, M. 'Qizavat-iZan' (Women's Judgment), *Zanan*, I(5), 21; and 'Ijtihadva marja'iiyyat- izanan' (Women's Religious Authority), *Zanan*, I(8), 24.

⁷⁰ Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2002). "The Conservative-Reformist Conflict Over Women's Rights in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16(1), 40.

⁷¹ Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 214.

⁷² Kar, M. (2001). "Women's Strategies in Iran from the 1979 Revolution to 1999," in *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*, ed. Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 193.

⁷³ Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 215.

and youth energised by his promises, and whether those promises had been made only to garner votes. The article asked pointedly: “When 80 percent of the country’s agriculture is done by women, why shouldn’t a woman be considered as the minister of agriculture?”⁷⁴ Khatami did not appoint any women to his cabinet as ministers. But the question had been asked, publicly, on the record. The accountability function that the government’s press ideology had systematically denied to Iranian journalism was being exercised, from within the permitted space, through a magazine the government could not easily close without exposing the poverty of its own claims to Islamic justice.

The Closure of *Zanan* in 2008 as a Symptom

In January 2008, under Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the Press Supervisory Board revoked *Zanan*’s licence as part of what Tajali’s analysis characterises as “a larger attack on civil society.”⁷⁵ The official grounds were that the magazine portrayed Iranian women in a “dark light” and posed a “threat to the psychological security of society.” The formulation deserves attention. To report on domestic violence, legal discrimination, and the impoverishment of women abandoned by their husbands was, in the government’s terms, to distort the image of Iranian womanhood. As Sherkat wrote in her own account of the closure: “What our journalists did to echo the needs and problems of women, with the intent of building awareness among Iranians and public officials so solutions could be found, was interpreted as being a darkened portrayal. To prevent our revelations about women and their issues from disturbing the public’s consciousness, *Zanan* was closed.”⁷⁶ The logic is that of the press ideology described in Chapter I: the press as a consolidatory instrument whose function is to confirm the revolutionary narrative, not to investigate the social reality that narrative conceals. By that logic, *Zanan* had been in violation of its function for sixteen years. What changed by 2008 was the political climate. The years of Khatami had been characterized by a partial tolerance. Under Ahmadinejad, however, this gave way to the systematic dismantling of reformist gains, and the calculated risk-taking that had allowed *Zanan* to keep publishing for so long was no longer possible.

The repeated harassment and closure of women’s magazines was, as Tajali argues, indicative of their political impact and of the extent to which conservatives feared their ability to publicise women’s demands and mobilise voters, jeopardising the conservative hold on power. The government did not close *Zanan* because it was marginal. It closed it because it had become indispensable. Sherkat’s assessment of the government’s logic remains the most precise available: “In a society that has yet to reach political maturity and where democracy has not become institutionalised, political leaders see the survival of their system in the envelopment of a protective cover against criticism. They seem unaware that tossing ash on fire only hides its glow, and it resurfaces and burns when least expected.”⁷⁷

Women Journalists as Critical Interlocutors

The Role of Journalists as Mediators Between Activists, Lawyers, and Public Opinion

The feminist press of the 1990s was not simply a publication phenomenon but an organisational one. Women journalists occupied a position at the intersection of multiple social and professional worlds, translating between the technical language of legal reform, the interpretive debates of religious intellectualism, the practical knowledge of activists, and the lived experience

⁷⁴ Tarighi, N. (2001). *Zanan*, quoted in Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 216.

⁷⁵ Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 217.

⁷⁶ Sherkat, S. (2009). “Telling the Stories of Iranian Women’s Lives”, *Nieman Reports*, retrieved from: <https://niemanreports.org/telling-the-stories-of-iranian-womens-lives/>.

⁷⁷ Sherkat, “Telling the Stories of Iranian Women’s Lives.”

of ordinary women navigating a discriminatory system. During this period, women journalists gained particular political weight through this mediating function, providing connective tissues between groups and individuals who might otherwise have struggled to find a common platform.

The cross-ideological solidarity that made this possible had been hard-won. As Islamist women editors acknowledged in the period, the sectarian positions of the first post-revolutionary years had isolated secular women to the detriment of all women, and the willingness to compensate for those errors was one of the founding impulses of the 1990s feminist press. The debates initiated by women's magazines had significant impact even on women within the political establishment. Faizeh Rafsanjani, daughter of the former president, articulated a position in the period directly shaped by the magazine debates, maintaining that "it is not Islam but the clergy's interpretations of its precepts which initiated the prohibition of women's access to the judiciary."⁷⁸ When a politician of the Rafsanjani family was adopting arguments first elaborated in *Zanan's* pages, the magazine's intellectual influence had clearly reached beyond its 120,000 readers into the heart of the political elite.

The most visible demonstration of *Zanan's* capacity to function as a political interlocutor was its engagement with the 1997 presidential election. Khatami's interview in *Zanan*, in which he spoke about his relationship with his wife and children and presented himself as a liberal Muslim, contrasted sharply with the refusal of the establishment candidate Nateq-Nuri to answer the same questions.⁷⁹ The impact of Khatami's smiling face on the magazine's cover and his willingness to engage with its probing questions shaped his image among female voters and contributed substantially to his electoral success. This was not simply political journalism, but reporting that actively shaped politics itself, making women's votes legible as a decisive bloc and women's issues visible as a central dimension of national electoral choice.

The Construction of Female Journalistic Authority and Visibility

The 1990s witnessed not only the proliferation of women's publications but the emergence of a distinctly female model of journalistic authority that challenged the gendered hierarchy of the Iranian press. This model was methodologically innovative. Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, chief editor of *Rouzname Zan* (روزنامه زن), articulated it with unusual clarity: "These issues were traditionally discussed and debated by the clergy. We have broken this tradition and have dared to challenge them by arguing about whose interpretation they are. In my newspaper, we first ask ordinary women how they feel about these laws and regulations, we then take women's demands to the specialists and to the clergy. Secondly, we analyse them and report them back to our readers. This way we discuss many real problems raised by ordinary people at the level of society and we argue that Islamic laws are dynamic and changeable."⁸⁰ What Hashemi is describing here is a journalistic methodology that inverts the traditional hierarchy of religious authority: rather than transmitting clerical interpretation downward to an ignorant laity, it carries the experience and demands of ordinary women upward to specialists and clergy, forcing them to engage with social reality rather than dictate it. This was not merely a different editorial approach. It was a different theory of the social function of journalism.

The assertiveness of this model provoked swift institutional response. *Zan*, with a circulation of 40,000 per day, was closed in April 1999 for challenging the *qessas* law, specifically for publishing a cartoon showing a gunman telling a male victim not to worry because killing a woman was "cheaper."⁸¹ The joke was a precise legal observation: under *qessas*, the blood money for a woman was worth half of that of a man. The government closed the newspaper.

⁷⁸ Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran", 93.

⁷⁹ Mir-Hosseini, "The Conservative-Reformist Conflict Over Women's Rights in Iran".

⁸⁰ Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran", 58.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

The institutional landscape of women's journalism continued to develop despite mounting pressure. In 1998, *Anjomane Senf-e Rouznamenegaran-e Zan* (انجمن صنف روزنامه نگاران زن), the Women Journalists Trade Association, was established – the first organization of its kind in Iran. It attracted a large membership and contributed to broader efforts toward democratization.⁸² These institutions also created employment for many women, with some publishing books, magazines, and journals exclusively on women's issues and others concentrating on children's issues and related areas. The structural conditions of female journalism remained deeply unequal: as Khiabany⁸³ documents, few women occupied roles as editors or section editors, most female reporters were assigned to cover "private" issues and rarely had the opportunity to interview high-ranking state officials, and most women journalists did their work "at the base of the pyramid of the press." An exception in these conditions was the feminist press, which remained a space where women were able to exercise genuine editorial authority. Still, it continued to function within a broader professional landscape that continued to marginalise them.

Legal Debates, Rights Discourse, and Negotiated Criticism

Family Law Reform as the Central Journalistic Field

If there was a terrain on which the feminist press of the 1990s was consistently and consequentially engaged, it was family law. The Civil Code provisions governing marriage, divorce, child custody, polygamy, and inheritance represented the most visible form of gender discrimination in Iranian law, affecting the daily lives of women. It provided a concrete, documentable basis for feminist critique that was harder to dismiss as cultural imperialism or Western interference than more abstract claims about political equality. The feminist press approached the issues surrounding family law both analytically and experientially. Legal analysis and personal testimony appeared side by side, each reinforcing the other.

The breadth of publications engaging with these issues was itself politically significant. *Zanan* and *Farzaneh* primarily communicated with the intelligentsia and the political elite.⁸⁴ *Zan-e Ruz*, despite its conservative publisher at the Kayhan Institute, was being transformed into an increasingly vocal magazine under pressure from the general trend, reaching a wider public including men, through its traditional content on cooking, fashion, and health care. Even the Qom religious seminary felt compelled to launch its own women's magazine, *Payam-e Zan*, in response to "the extent and multitude of queries by the female population."⁸⁵ Tellingly, however, while all other women's magazines were edited by women, *Payam-e Zan*'s editorial board was composed exclusively of men. The clerical establishment was willing to address women's questions but not to let women address them. The contrast between this institutional arrangement and the editorial practices of *Zanan* is striking. It also crystallised the fundamental disagreement at stake: who had the authority to interpret Islamic law regarding women?

The limits of permissible legal criticism were tested most acutely in the treatment of the *hijab*. It is significant, as Mir-Hosseini⁸⁶ observes, that "even an outspoken cleric such as Sa'idzadeh and a daring magazine like *Zanan* had been careful to avoid the *hijab* issue in their critique of the construction of gender rights in Islamic law." In the government's symbolic narrative, the compulsory veil represented the non-negotiable core of the Islamic order. Any internal reformist argument would be seen as a direct challenge to the Revolution's legitimacy. In practice, however, many women had challenged the imposition of the hijab from the outset, and its frontiers were

⁸² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸³ Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 207.

⁸⁴ Kian, "Women and Politics," 93.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁶ Mir-Hosseini, "The Conservative–Reformist Conflict Over Women's Rights in Iran," 41.

constantly pushed back, especially by the generation born after the Revolution and theoretically indoctrinated to accept it as a core value. After 1997, with the opening of political space, debate over compulsory hijab resurfaced in the reformist press. Articles appeared questioning the wisdom of the policy and pointing to its incompatibility with the new discourse of rights.⁸⁷ The government responded to the resurfacing of this debate with legislation: a July 1998 law sought to prohibit the press debate on women's rights "outside the legal and Islamic framework," though it proved so far removed from social realities that it was impossible to implement. The compulsory hijab remained the ultimate limit of the feminist insider strategy, the place where the logic of arguing from within the system reached its structural boundary.

The Limits of Reformism and Early Signs of Backlash

Tensions Within the Reform Movement and Women's Issues

The reformist opening of the 1990s was not experienced uniformly by Iranian women. Highly educated professional women with cultural exposure to the West found themselves, in the words of Mehranguiz Kar, "in the spotlight as the most visible symbols of western cultural imperialism,"⁸⁸ the easiest targets of an anti-Western campaign that had not disappeared with the end of the revolutionary decade but had simply been forced underground. The paradox these women faced was structural: their education and professional competence made them both the most capable agents of feminist change and the most visible targets for those who wished to frame that change as foreign contamination.

The conservative women's elite within the political establishment presented a different but related problem. Their political power rested on the traditional wing, and to safeguard that power they consistently refused to go beyond "vague, rhetorical, and general statements about women's issues."⁸⁹

As Mehranguiz Kar notes, ordinary conservative religious women were increasingly moving away from conservative politicians precisely because the female elite was unwilling to use its position to address their actual concerns. This political vacuum was one of the spaces the feminist press occupied: by taking seriously the concerns of ordinary women across ideological lines, *Zanan* and its sister publications built a constituency that cut across the secular-religious divide and could not be contained within the institutional categories the government had constructed.

Conservative Attacks and the Politics of De-legitimisation

The success of the feminist press in building this cross-ideological constituency made it a priority target for conservative forces seeking to defend the gender order against what they understood as ideological infiltration. Women's magazines were increasingly subjected to both verbal attacks from the traditionalist press, including *Keyhan* and *Subh*, and physical attacks by Hezbollah mobs backed by the traditionalist clergy.⁹⁰ The defence of women's rights was characterised in conservative discourse as "an attempt to annihilate Islam and the revolution through accommodating Western cultural invasion."⁹¹ The strategy of delegitimisation operated through deliberate terminological distortion: conservatives attacked feminism by defining it as *zansalari* (female domination), *bebandobari* (unrestrained behaviour), and *hamjens-bazi*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁸ Tohidi, N. in Tohidi, N. and Bayes, J.H. (2001). *Globalization, Gender, and Religion*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 178.

⁸⁹ Tohidi, N. *Globalization, Gender, and Religion*, 181.

⁹⁰ Kian, "Women and Politics in Iran" 93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

(lesbianism)⁹², categories that were culturally threatening in precisely calculated ways, since lesbianism was forbidden and punishable under Sharia. As Povey documents, the result was that a large number of women who supported women's liberation in their varied ways became reluctant to call themselves feminists, because the term had been successfully polluted in public discourse.

The case of *Zanan* itself illustrated the specific mechanisms of conservative attack. When the magazine published a special issue entitled "Women Talk About Men's Impact on Their Lives," featuring forty renowned women, most of them secular, a petition was launched demanding that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance retract the magazine's authorisation to publish. The petition was not based on any specific legal violation. It was based on the fact that secular women had been treated as authoritative voices on their own lives. This was the offense: not the content of what they had said, but the institutional legitimacy that publication in *Zanan* had conferred on their saying it.

Islamic Feminists' Defence of Reinterpretation

The feminist magazines of the period did not simply absorb these attacks. They responded to them, and their responses elaborated a coherent intellectual defence of the re-interpretive project that became one of the most significant contributions of the period to Islamic feminist thought. *Payam-e Hajar* argued that revising laws oppressive to women was not only compatible with Islamic principles but necessary to prevent the Western feminist movement from replacing Islamic laws, and that such reinterpretation "will definitely please God and God's messengers." *Farzaneh* insisted that Islam could "actively and dynamically stand up before secular value systems that claim to defend women's rights," and defended women's studies as a field compatible with and indeed required by Khomeini's own vision of women's rights as "an essential strategy of the Islamic Revolution."⁹³ The argument was sophisticated: by grounding the feminist project in the revolutionary legacy itself, these publications made it extremely difficult for conservatives to dismiss them as counter-revolutionary without implicitly criticising Khomeini.

The theoretical coherence of this position was significant. Islamic feminists argued that changes in Islamic jurisprudence could occur "in accord with the times and new realities without abandoning Islamic principles,"⁹⁴ and that the *fiqh* tradition itself contained the resources for this development. This was not a capitulation to Islamic authority. It was a claim on that authority, an insistence that the tradition was dynamic and that women were entitled to participate in its ongoing elaboration. The press was the space in which this insistence was most publicly and most persistently made, and it is no coincidence that, as Khiabany argues, "nowhere is the exposure of religion to 'modernity' so evident and publicised as in the case of the press."⁹⁵

The Crackdown on the Press from 2000 Onwards

The assault on the reformist press that gathered force after the spring 2000 Berlin Conference was not random repression. It was a systematic attempt to close the institutional spaces that reformist politics had opened, targeting the press specifically because, in the absence of political parties, it had become the primary arena of public debate. The attempted assassination of Said Hajjarian in March 2000⁹⁶ announced the escalation of conservative strategy from institutional obstruction to direct political violence. The subsequent wave of closures shut down most of the reformist press, arrested several journalists, and amended the press law to prevent banned publications from

⁹² Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran", 62.

⁹³ Tohidi, *Globalization, Gender, and Religion*, 187.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 199.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

reconstituting themselves under new names. As Keddie⁹⁷ documents, after 2000 Khatami was able to influence foreign and economic policy but could not safeguard press and other freedoms. The reformist experiment had reached its structural limits.

Yet the crackdown could not undo what the decade had produced. It could close newspapers but not erase the political consciousness that newspapers had built. The women's movement that emerged from the 1990s was, as Alikarami⁹⁸ documents, equipped with "a profound understanding of Iranian society" built through a "long historical process of struggle for gender equality," and its activists had learned to operate across the boundary between public and private spheres. In the early years of the decade, most feminist meetings had been held in private homes around International Women's Day, with domestic spaces functioning as "refuges for women's rights activists, who gathered under the umbrella of book reading sessions and poetry recitals and film reviews to discuss women's issues and engage in feminist debates."⁹⁹ From the 1990s onward, the gradual expansion of non-state media allowed women to carve out a space within it. When the press crackdown came, the networks, the arguments, and solidarities built through a decade of feminist journalism went underground, adapting and reconstituting themselves in new forms.

Conclusion

The 1990s established, in compressed form, the entire range of possibilities and impossibilities that would define women's journalism in Iran for the following two decades. The reformist opening created conditions for a feminist press that was politically engaged, theologically rigorous, legally literate, and organizationally connected to a women's movement that transcended the divide between secular and religious activists. *Zanan* at the centre of this press was not simply a magazine. It was a model of journalistic practice, a demonstration that feminist claims could be made from within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic by exploiting the gap between what the government permitted and what it could easily prosecute. The closure of *Zanan* in 2008 and the crackdown that preceded it demonstrated the structural limits of this strategy. Insider journalism of this kind required conditions of political tolerance that a consolidated conservative government was unwilling to provide. But it also demonstrated, in the very intensity of the repression it provoked, how much the government feared what the feminist press had built. The decade from 1990 to 2000 produced not only a body of published journalism but a generation of journalists, a set of arguments, and a political imagination that would outlast every attempt to extinguish it.

⁹⁷ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 313, 334.

⁹⁸ Alikarami, L. (2019). *Women and Equality in Iran: Law, Society and Activism*, London: I.B. Tauris, 160.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

III. Digitalisation and Hybrid Journalistic Practices (2000–2009)

Concepts: *Conservative crackdown; Weblogistan; Citizen journalism; De-professionalisation; Surveillance; Adaptive strategies; Gendered cyberspace*

Introduction

The opening of the public sphere examined in the previous chapter did not survive the millennium. The reformist press that had blossomed under Khatami's first term, the feminist insider journalism modelled by *Zanan* and other publications, the cross-ideological solidarities built between secular and religious women all remained vulnerable to a structure of power they had only ever partially destabilised. The decade that began with Ali Khamenei's April 2000 speech accusing reformist newspapers of being a domestic "base of the enemy" and closed with the contested presidential election of June 2009 was the decade in which the limits of reformist insider strategies became unambiguous. Yet the same decade also witnessed the migration of journalism, feminist debate, and political contestation onto digital platforms whose architecture the Islamic Republic had not been designed to govern. This chapter examines that double movement. On the one hand, it traces the systematic dismantling of the reformist print press through a coordinated deployment of judicial, legal, and extra-legal instruments; on the other, it documents the emergence of *Weblogistan* as a parallel public sphere whose particular gendered density would, in retrospect, appear as one of the most consequential transformations of the period. These two movements were not sequential but co-constitutive. While the closures induced migration, migration produced new objects of state surveillance. Surveillance, in turn, contributed to the emergence of a generation of digitally adept individuals whose tools and networks would become consequential in the mobilisation following the 2009 election.

Closure of Reformist Outlets and Hardening Censorship

The Wave of Reformist Newspaper Closures (2000–2004): Scale and Legal Mechanisms

The April 2000 crackdown on the reformist press did not begin as a discrete event. It began as a speech. On 20 April, addressing a congregation of one hundred thousand at Tehran's Grand Mosque, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei accused some ten to fifteen newspapers of writing as if directed from a single centre, undermining Islamic and revolutionary principles, and creating tension and discord in society. He warned that "the same enemy who wants to overthrow the [regime] has found a base in the country" and that "some of the press have become the base of the enemy."¹⁰⁰ Two days later, sixteen newspapers were closed. The sweeping closures, coupled with a dizzying spate of court summonses and the jailing of journalists, signalled a coordinated counter-offensive by hardliners following their defeat in the February 2000 parliamentary elections. Conservatives had deduced that criticism in the reformist press was beginning to erode their authority, and the crackdown delivered a signal that they would not hesitate to use their control of key state institutions, particularly the judiciary, to counterattack. The most effective way to block reform, in their analysis, was to silence all critical voices.

This assault stood in striking contrast to the optimism many reformist journalists had felt only three years earlier, after Khatami's election in May 1997. Soon after taking office, Khatami had delivered on his campaign promise to promote press freedom. In the ensuing months, dozens of new publications had hit the market with the help of his appointees in the Ministry of Culture and

¹⁰⁰ Campagna, J. (2000). "Iran Briefing", retrieved from: <https://cpj.org/reports/2000/05/iran-may00/>.

Islamic Guidance. The liberal press had quickly assumed the role of government watchdog and political platform for the reform movement, with scrutiny of corruption and other official misdeeds becoming regular media fare. The press had also become the forum for a rich debate about the Islamic Republic's theocratic form of government, including aspects of Islamic law concerning the death penalty and women's rights. Liberal clerics had even dared to publish articles criticising the sacred political doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* and questioning whether the Supreme Leader should in fact be exempt from public criticism. The April clampdown was not a sudden break but the culmination of a relentless judicial campaign of harassment and censorship that had been underway for two years. This was organised around the Press Court headed by the conservative judge Said Mortazavi and structured around recurring patterns of newspaper closures, journalist arrests, and long-term imprisonment.

The institutional architecture that made this crackdown possible determined the shape of the events which followed. In response to the reformist press's attempt to act as a fourth estate, exercising the public scrutiny that organised political parties were unable to provide, the judiciary "much more than before, assumed the function of political control."¹⁰¹ The instruments of this control were multiple and overlapping: a current press law passed just before the parliamentary election of 2000; an anachronistic law on libel and selective reading of pre- and post-revolutionary laws; censorship; violation of publications, premises, equipment, and facilities; regular harassment of journalists; imprisonment and fines; and outright banning. Equally consequential was the new amendment to the press law that made it considerably more difficult for the publishers of banned newspapers to relaunch their publications under new names, closing the very loophole the reformist press had exploited so resourcefully through its serial reincarnations from *Jame'eh* to *Tousto* to *Neshat* to *Asr-e Azadegan*. The amendment did not simply punish individual transgressions; it dismantled the institutional resilience of the reformist press as such.

The Legislative Offensive and the Politics of Press Regulation

The legislative dimension of the assault was equally revealing. The conservative-dominated parliament went on the offensive by promoting amendments to the existing Press Law of 1985.¹⁰² Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nuri, the parliamentary speaker who had lost to Khatami in 1997, framed the press as a "gateway for cultural invasion" requiring appropriate measures.¹⁰³ The new law allowed courts to force journalists to reveal their sources and banned any form of journalistic activity by those who had been involved in alleged "anti-establishment" activities. It also held the press responsible for encouraging acts of violence and unrest, increased punishments for press offences, and extended provisions to cover online media.¹⁰⁴ The closure of the newspaper *Salam* on 7 July 1999, coupled with the parliament's preliminary approval of this more restrictive Press Bill, triggered a wave of student protests unparalleled since the Revolution of 1979. The "six days that shook Iran" in July 1999 were met with considerable force, but their political afterlife was significant: they demonstrated to conservatives and reformists alike that press regulation had become the terrain on which the broader question of the Islamic Republic's political future was being contested.¹⁰⁵

The reformist parliament that emerged from the February 2000 elections attempted to undo the damage. It called for a review of the restrictive Press Law and appealed to the judiciary to reopen the newspapers that had been closed since April 2000. In an extraordinary and rare event, Khamenei intervened directly to disrupt these attempts: a *Majlis* dominated by reformists had

¹⁰¹ Gholam Khiabany, *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2010), 104.

¹⁰² Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 107.

¹⁰³ Cited in Bill Samii, in Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 107.

¹⁰⁴ Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

scheduled a debate to discuss and vote on amendments that would have made the closure of newspapers before any fair trial illegal on 6 August. Khamenei, who had the final say in all state matters, sent a letter addressed to MPs and forced the parliament to abandon the debate.¹⁰⁶ The intervention was decisive. By early August 2000, twenty-one newspapers had been closed, the publisher Saïd Hajjarian had been shot, internationally renowned intellectuals had been imprisoned, and mere participation in debates about civil society and political reform had become sufficient to be considered an act of treason.¹⁰⁷ The press had become, in Khiabany's formulation, "the open battleground on which conflicts between different sections of the government were played out."¹⁰⁸

Cumulative Effects and the Closure of *Zanan*

The cumulative numerical effects of this assault were devastating. According to the annual report of the Society for Defence of Press Freedom in Iran, by the end of 2001, forty-seven publications had been closed, including sixteen dailies, nineteen weeklies, and seven monthlies. The circulation of the press in the same period had decreased by 45 per cent, falling from 3,120,000 to 1,750,000.¹⁰⁹ The impact extended well beyond the press: in almost all sectors of cultural industry there was clear and undeniable evidence of decline in 2000 compared to the optimistic year of 1998.¹¹⁰ In 2002, a Reporters Without Borders annual report found that Iran was the largest jail for journalists in the Middle East: more than thirty journalists were behind bars, at least six journalists and writers had been killed between 1998 and 2002, many had been banned from further journalistic activities, and hundreds had lost their jobs.¹¹¹ The defensive response of the international press freedom community was significant. Shahla Lahiji received the 2001 PEN Freedom to Write Award, Mashallah Shamsolvaezine the CPJ International Press Freedom Award, and Faraj Sarkuhi was listed among the International Press Institute's fifty World Press Freedom Heroes; figures including Mehranguiz Kar received regular coverage from International PEN and the Digital Freedom Network.¹¹² The Iranian feminist press, in particular, had become legible internationally precisely because it was being domestically dismantled.

The closure of *Zanan* in January 2008 represented, in this trajectory, not a culmination but a delayed consequence. *Zanan* had survived for sixteen years through the strategic combination of repeated legal defences before authorities and courts, the cultivation of a base of loyal subscribers, and reliance on women-directed advertising.¹¹³ The magazine had trained a large number of young and dedicated reporters to approach women-related issues with attention to the social, political, and cultural problems being overlooked, discussing them with politicians, social workers, clerics, lawyers, doctors, academics, and specialists in search of solutions, and reporting on the many women doing challenging and inspiring work in business, law, the arts, and sports. The magazine's license was revoked by the Press Supervisory Board, a body that includes representatives from different branches of the government but was, at the moment of closure, dominated by the hard-line Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Relying on a little-known guideline issued by the National Security Council in 2000, the Board accused *Zanan* of threatening "the psychological security of society," deliberately showing women's situation in the Islamic Republic in a "black light," and weakening "military and revolutionary institutions, including the

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ Society for Defence of Press Freedom in Iran. "Annual Report 2001", cited in Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 113.

¹¹⁰ Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 113.

¹¹¹ Reporters Sans Frontières. "Annual Report 2002", cited in Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 115.

¹¹² Khiabany, *Iranian Media*, 115.

¹¹³ Farhi, F. (2008). "Silencing a Voice of Reason", *New York Times*, 8 February 2008, retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/08/opinion/08iht-edfarhi.1.9872534.html>.

Basij.” The magazine was further accused of holding “an extreme feminist stance.” By revoking *Zanan*’s license, the Press Supervisory Board acted well beyond its legal mandate, since it is the press court and jury that ultimately have authority to ban a publication. The pretext for the closure was reportedly the magazine’s recent coverage of a rape committed by two members of the Basij.¹¹⁴ The grounds for closure underscored the regime’s enduring fear of women’s independent voices: “In January 2008, the large circulation feminist magazine *Zanan* was also shut down on the grounds that it showed Iranian women in a ‘dark light’ and was a ‘threat to the psychological security of society’.”¹¹⁵ This closure crystallized the tension between the state’s vision of a controlled press and *Zanan*’s commitment to feminist critique. Later, Sherkat wrote herself about this decision “In a society that has yet to reach political maturity and where democracy has not become institutionalized, political leaders see the survival of their system in the envelopment of a protective cover against criticism.”¹¹⁶ Women professionals, artists, writers and critics have lost their tribune. Most of the activists whose work was published in *Zanan* no longer have an arena for the free expression of their thoughts and ideas. Although forced into closure, *Zanan*’s impact was not extinguished. It remains one of the most influential feminist magazines of post-revolutionary Iran, redefining the space for women’s activism by arguing that feminism and Islam were not mutually exclusive. Its bold editorial line challenged both state censorship and conservative discourse. Sherkat, as an editor, gained global recognition, becoming a symbol of Iranian feminist resistance.

The reformist press of the Khatami years had thus not been simply contained. By the middle of the 2000s, it had been structurally dismantled. Yet, as the rest of this chapter will present, the dismantling was never as complete as the closures suggested, because it coincided with the emergence of a digital infrastructure that the same instruments of repression were considerably less well-equipped to govern.

Rise of Blogs, Websites, and Early Digital Platforms

The Architecture of a Parallel Public Sphere

The migration of journalism, feminist debate, and political contestation onto digital platforms during the 2000s came as a new space whose characteristics were structurally different than the traditional press. Where print journalism had required licenses, capital, professional training, and physical infrastructure, the new digital forms could be free of it. A blog could be opened anonymously in an evening; a collective platform could be assembled by a few activists with minimal financial outlay; a feminist site could host materials that no licensed magazine would have been permitted to print. The quantitative dimensions of this transformation are striking. While Iran was still lagging behind richer countries in the region, it registered the largest increase in internet usage in the Middle East between 2000 and 2005, with growth of 2,900 per cent.¹¹⁷ By the early 2010s, the country had reached forty-three million internet users, including those accessing the network through internet cafés. According to figures cited in *Sarmayeh* (سرمایه) newspaper, the number of filtered websites alone increased from five million in 2008 to ten million in 2009.¹¹⁸ The range of internet users grew considerably more diverse in terms of

¹¹⁴ Sreberny A. and Khiabany, G. (2010). *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 123.

¹¹⁵ Afary, J. (2009). *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 5–6.

¹¹⁶ Sherkat, S. (2009). “Telling the Stories of Iranian Women’s Lives”, *Nieman Reports*, 2 June 2009, retrieved from: <https://niemanreports.org/telling-the-stories-of-iranian-womens-lives/>.

¹¹⁷ Khiabany, G. (2010). *Iranian Media*, 50.

¹¹⁸ *Sarmayeh* newspaper. (2009). cited in Karimi, S. (2014). “Iranian Women’s Identity and Cyberspace: Case Study of Stealthy Freedom”, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies*,

location, age, gender, class, and ethnicity than had previously been the case.

The Gendered Density of Weblogistan

What gave this digital transformation its particular density and political consequence was the gendered character of its early adoption. Female bloggers, predominantly young, were among the pioneers of Iranian digital expression.¹¹⁹ The reasons are not difficult to reconstruct. In a passage cited at length by Sreberny and Khiabany, Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi argues that the cultural significance of cyberspace varies considerably from place to place according to people's diverse experiences, lacks, needs, and aspirations: in democratic societies, it functions as a parallel or complementary public sphere; in countries where public spaces are controlled by restrictive cultural forces, it can take on a quite different signification, becoming a means to resist the restrictions imposed on those spaces. For marginalised groups such as youth and women, Amir-Ebrahimi suggests, the internet can be a space "more 'real' than everyday life."¹²⁰ This formulation captures the structural condition that defined Iranian female blogging in the 2000s: the disembodied character of the web allowed the redefinition of identity, the discussion of taboo subjects, and forms of testimony that public spaces of the Islamic Republic prohibited. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone, surveying the same terrain, identifies the political stakes of this displacement with particular clarity:

*For educated young Iranian women, cyberspace is a liberating territory of one's own – a place to resist a traditionally imposed subordinate identity while providing a break from pervasive Islamic restrictions in public physical space. The virtual nature of the internet – the structure of interconnection in cyberspace that draws participants into ongoing discourses on issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics, and the textual process of self-expression without the prohibition or limitation of physical space – offers new possibilities for women's agency and empowerment.*¹²¹

The phenomenon was not marginal but generationally distinctive. As Nouraie-Simone observes, "the popularity of weblogs (frequently updated online journals), or blogs, among Iranian youth in recent years is a radical phenomenon. Young women, many in their twenties, have embraced the new technology with enthusiasm."¹²² The demographic profile of these bloggers was particular. They were, as Nouraie-Simone characterises them, "young professionals: university students, journalists, NGO activists, and literary and social critics – mostly residing in Tehran, where technical resources are most likely to be easily available." They used the internet "as individuals for personal use in chat rooms and for e-mail; as journalists, writers, website designers and graphic artists for professional resources, and as a wide cross section of bloggers who, through journal writing, daily updates, and intimate self-expression, articulate their own values forcefully – discussing feminism and social equality – free to reveal their inner feelings and ideas."¹²³ This was, in other words, a population whose social and educational capital had outstripped the public roles that the Islamic Republic was prepared to grant it, and for whom the internet offered a form of expressive compensation that the regulated public sphere refused.

The numerical scale of this development was remarkable. A report by Massoud Behnood on BBC Persian estimated that there were 13,000 weblogs in Iran in 2003, while Pedram Moallemian claimed that the number of active weblogs written in Persian had reached 50,000 by May of the

227.

¹¹⁹ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*.

¹²⁰ Amir-Ebrahimi, M. cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 3.

¹²¹ Nouraie-Simone, F. ed. (2014). *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 124.

¹²² Nouraie-Simone, F. (2014). *On Shifting Ground*, 125.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 127.

same year. Estimates rose rapidly thereafter: a 2005 report estimated the number of Iranian blogs at 700,000.¹²⁴ By early 2009, blogging had grown into “a massive collective phenomenon,” sometimes estimated at 400,000 to 700,000 blogs, making Persian one of the leading languages in the global blogosphere.¹²⁵ Persian blogs were among the most numerous of any language in the world of weblogs.¹²⁶ Nouraie-Simone, writing from the mid-decade vantage point, observes that “more than sixty-five thousand different blogs in Farsi allow young Iranians to write, interact, and voice opinions on everything from politics to daily activities, while making Farsi the fourth most popular language on the internet.”¹²⁷ The discrepancy between such estimates is itself indicative: no central registry existed, and the rapid growth meant that any numerical claim was outdated almost as soon as it was made. These blogs constituted what came to be popularly named *Weblogistan*: a distinct sort of public space in which Iranians, particularly the young, assembled, expressed themselves, and rearticulated their identities through cyber exchange and interaction.

The economic conditions of this expansion were as important as the cultural ones. Unlike other media including the press, broadcasting, and music, blogs could be launched with very little economic resource.¹²⁸ Blogs were a paradigmatic example of “small media” that could exist as long as their authors had the necessary commitment, time, and connection. The weblog form was, in this sense, structurally suited to the conditions of an Iranian society in which capital-intensive media production had become politically inaccessible to anyone outside the regime’s ideological perimeter. The institutional infrastructure of *Weblogistan* developed rapidly. Companies such as PersianBlog and Blogfa became recognised online brand names in Iranian new media, providing the technical platforms on which the explosion of personal and collective publishing depended. By 2005, weblogs had become sufficiently mainstream that all candidates in that year’s elections operated dedicated sites and blogs; even Khamenei established a website.¹²⁹ Iranian sites and blogs emerged as new sources of information about various aspects of public life in the country, providing a strong link between activists and intellectuals in Iran and the opposition abroad. The internet became the latest tool to offer alternative news channels to Iranian activists in Iran as well as much-needed international support and solidarity, including from Iranians living in exile.

Collective Feminist Platforms

The collective feminist platforms that emerged within this ecosystem represented a particularly significant development, because they translated the editorial and political ambitions of the closed feminist press into a digital form that was both more difficult for the state to suppress and more directly connected to the practical work of activism. The Women’s Cultural Centre (*Markaz-e Farhangi-e Zanan*) (مرکز فرهنگی زنان) was launched in March 2000 by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, director of the publishing house Nashr-e Towseh, and Shahla Lahiji, the publisher behind *Roshangaran*, and was officially registered as an NGO in July of the same year. It was, as Sreberny and Khiabany observe, a response to the urgent need for more organised efforts by secular feminists, announcing its arrival onto the political scene through an event celebrating International Women’s Day in 2000.¹³⁰ The Centre’s activities included organising a petition and campaign for Iran to join the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as regular meetings, seminars, gatherings, and workshops. They focused on a range of issues from Afghan women in exile and the killing of street women to violence against women, the impact of war on women, solidarity with Palestinian women, and the

¹²⁴ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 35.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹²⁶ Semati, M. (2008). *Living with Globalization and the Islamic State: An Introduction to Media, Culture, and Society in Iran*, Oxon: Routledge, 48.

¹²⁷ Nouraie-Simone, F. (2014). *On Shifting Ground*, 128.

¹²⁸ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 37–38.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

conditions of women workers in Iran. The Centre launched its site *Feminist Tribune* (*iftribune.com*) in 2003, which after nearly two years was filtered by the regime in November 2005 before resuming work a few months later.

The site *Zanestan* (زنستن – *herlandmag.com*), which introduced itself as the first online Persian publication for women, published six issues covering a diverse range of topics with regular updates, polemics, statistics, news, and analysis, and launched its associated weblog on 6 March 2006 to provide additional space for quicker interventions. In the first posting of the collective blog, Ahmadi-Khorasani jokingly blamed the feminist blogger Farnaz for getting them into the mess of “collective blogs,” before suggesting, with a sharp polemical inversion, that if the Iranian state wanted to have nuclear energy, women had at least an equal claim to one of their own. “I, one of the members of *alam nesvan* (world of women),” she wrote, “demand the establishment of an independent nuclear site for the independent women’s movement; this is ‘our absolute right’ and one of our demands. Now even if our case goes well in various agencies and councils, and God-willing passes all different stages in good health, perhaps our slogan for next year might be: For every Iranian woman one centrifuge, for the enrichment of equal gender relations!”¹³¹ The humour simultaneously signalled the political seriousness of the platform and its refusal to inhabit the deferential posture that the regime expected of women’s publications.

The ecosystem of feminist sites that took shape across the decade was extremely dense. *Meydaan Zanan* (میدان زنان – Women’s Field) brought together various activists and campaigns, describing itself as a focal point at which Iranian feminists organised against gender inequality and challenged different aspects of discrimination. From 2007 onward, *Meydaan* actively petitioned for the release of women arrested for demonstrating, and hosted more than twenty articles and interviews engaging with the question of CEDAW, which Iran has not ratified.¹³² Other sites including *Iranian Feminists Tribune*, *Women in Iran*, *Focus of Iranian Women*, and *Zanestan* combined news with critical analysis of women’s lives, experiences, concerns, and struggles at national and international levels. The Association of Iranian Women site offered what was at the time the most comprehensive list of women’s organisations in Iran, with 125 entries ranging from NGOs and charitable foundations to research centres and local organisations. *Womeniniran.org*, launched in June 2002, became one of the key spaces in which activists raised significant gender-related issues and was the subject of regular interventions and disruptions by the authorities. *IranDokht.com*, launched in 2002 outside Iran with more than eighty contributors, presented itself as an online media platform connecting the global community to Iranian women, functioning as “a kaleidoscope of lifestyles, identities, art, and culture, reflecting the tensions between modernity and tradition.”¹³³ Its content combined regular news updates and interviews with activists, journalists, and writers inside and outside Iran with practical material on health, communities, dating, and jobs. *Persianfemale.com* offered information across categories spanning news, fashion, art, culture, health, society, leisure, education, psychology, and shopping. The breadth of these sites mattered. Just as *Zanan* in print had always combined rigorous legal analysis with cooking and beauty advice, digital sites integrated political content into the texture of everyday concerns. In this way, feminist arguments reached audiences who might never have actively sought them out. The demographic conditions shaping this ecosystem were themselves significant. A 2003 survey of young Iranian women, commissioned by the Centre for Promoting Women’s Participation of the President’s Office, found that their primary concerns were unemployment and the lack of job opportunities, followed by the absence of security, the lack of recreational facilities, and barriers to participation in competitive sports. The astonishing finding, as Nourai-Simone reports, was that “marriage ranked as the lowest priority or preference to advance women’s social position – only 7 percent ranked marriage as a path to the

¹³¹ Khorasani, N.A. (2006). *Zanestan* [collective blog], cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 108.

¹³² Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 109.

¹³³ *IranDokht.com*, mission statement, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 107.

improvement of their social lives.”¹³⁴ The gap between the future these young women imagined for themselves and the future the Islamic Republic was prepared to offer them was, in itself, one of the propulsive conditions of Iranian female blogging.

Personal Blogging and the Intimate as Political

The women bloggers articulated their thoughts from the openly political to the radically intimate what blogging as a form made possible. From professional, non-personal journalism, women’s voices and activism shifted towards a new medium, which blurred the lines between their individuality and public life. An anecdote became the mirror of society and lived realities by women, which many could then identify with.

Parastoo, who began writing in June 2002 under her own name, became known for her unflinching account of the everyday gendered experience of public life in Iran. She recalled, for instance, a visit to a restaurant with a group of friends where the waiters seemed concerned about the level of noise and the lack of interest by the group in observing “Islamic ethics,” prompting her to ask what precisely this was supposed to mean and why the same concern was not raised about a much smaller but noisier group of men.¹³⁵ She reported the closure of the Women’s Cultural Centre by the authorities for printing a picture of the celebrated Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad in the Centre’s calendar without a *hijab*, sarcastically suggesting that Forough should have known there would be a revolution and taken some photos with the *hijab* before she died. While Parastoo remained an activist and wrote passionately about public politics, her blog also contained personal commentary on university, work, family, relationships, daily life, cinema, and literature. She was fully aware of the dilemmas of blogging as a woman. Because she wrote under her own name, in order to be honest and true to herself, she was conscious of the possibility of hurting herself and others, with the political concerns weighing on her mind alongside concerns about her family.

Lady Sun, the screen name of Sanam Dolatshahi, was one of the earliest and best-recognised Iranian women bloggers, having begun her work in 2001.¹³⁶ Nouraie-Simone documents, a twenty-four-year-old educated Iranian woman started her first blog with the online identity *Khorshidkhanoom* (Lady Sun) in November 2001, opening it with the simple statement that her purpose was “for the voice of women to be heard and to write about whatever comes to mind, of things I like or dislike.”¹³⁷ Her blog soon became one of the most popular, measured by an increased number of hits and links to other blogs, and her example helped catalyse a wider movement: “many young, educated women started their own blogs, greatly increasing the Iranian blog community – known as Weblogestan.”¹³⁸ In a frequently cited passage, Lady Sun articulated the meaning of this collective presence:

*It is a very good feeling to know one is not alone in this new world of wires, chips, keyboards and numbers. So, I am happy to be an electronic Lady Sun. We are like scattered bits and pieces coming together in cyberspace to make a whole complete picture to show the world our true selves. These weblogs are the real mirror representing us and Iranian society. The more participants there are, the more mirrors there are to reflect our situation... this space is our sanctuary. Cyberspace is the place of our becoming. In every single blog there is part of Iran. Cyberspace is our social space of freedom. Here is a free city, where we can express ourselves freely, and we can write whatever we like.*¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Nouraie-Simone, F. (2014). *On Shifting Ground*, 131.

¹³⁵ Parastoo, [blog post], in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 118.

¹³⁶ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 120.

¹³⁷ Lady Sun, quoted in Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 127.

¹³⁸ Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 127.

¹³⁹ Lady Sun, quoted in Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 127.

The metaphor of the “free city” did political work that no description from a more detached vantage point could have accomplished: it named cyberspace as a polity in its own right, one whose conditions of membership were not those of the Islamic Republic. She launched her English-language blog in April 2003 with a simple “Hi,” explaining the next day why she had decided to write in English: she was “fed up with all the worries I have had about my Persian weblog. People are getting arrested. Sina, our lovely friend is in jail, mostly because of what he has written in his weblog.” She described the rumours of an emerging trend toward closing internet sites and weblogs in Iran and her awareness of the thousands of strangers who read her every day, including the possibility of “government-related visitors” and “guys from the intelligence service.” She wrote that she had been deliberately conservative in the preceding months, “completely aware of the eyes watching every single move of us,” but that the English weblog might allow her to “write about my naked observations of this crazy world honestly, uncensored and real.”¹⁴⁰ Lady Sun considered herself a member of the women’s movement in Iran, worked with the One Million Signatures Campaign, and edited and contributed to a range of platforms including *womeniniran.net* and *StopCensoringUs*, as well as the official website of the human rights lawyer Mehranguiz Kar. She left Iran with her husband in 2004 and would later, in January 2009, be employed by the new BBC Persian television channel – a trajectory whose significance for the question of journalistic work will be examined in the next section.

The intimacy of women’s blogging in this period extended into territories that licensed publications could never have approached. The blog *Dokhtar boodan* (دختر بودن – “Being a Girl”) was exploring what it meant to be a girl in terms of relationship, sex, family, and body. Sharing from her intimate stories, the writer posted short entries dealing with her periods, the gradual shrinking of her circle of friends as people left the country, and the physical experiences after a long kiss.¹⁴¹ Gistela’s blog *Golden Hair* announced its arrival in July 2004 with a short item entitled “I’ve come,” in which the author described having read blogs for years before deciding to write her own. The main focus of her postings was the inner anxiety of women in Iran, with feminist arguments she saw as needing to address a sense of inequality coming “from inside rather than from external obstacles.”¹⁴² The innocence of such explicit writing about fantasies and projections, in Sreberny and Khiabany’s assessment, spoke of women’s frustrations but also of “the over-sexualisation of an environment in which honest sexual encounters are rendered impossible.”¹⁴³ The body that was so heavily regulated in the streets of the Islamic Republic was, in *Weblogistan*, not so much absent as recovered: spoken about, written about, and theorised as a political object in a way that the physical public sphere had foreclosed.

What this generation of women bloggers held in common, despite the differences in their backgrounds and emphases, was a refusal to defer. As Nouraie-Simone frames it, the bloggers included “educated, committed women: activists, intellectuals, journalists, writers, filmmakers, television camerawomen, teachers, lawyers, nurses, doctors, workers, and now – bloggers.”¹⁴⁴ The list itself indicates the social breadth of the phenomenon: blogging was not the activity of a particular sub-culture but rather an additional register of expression adopted by women already active across the institutions of Iranian public life.

¹⁴⁰ Dolatshahi, S. (Lady Sun) (2003). “Why an English Weblog?”, 29 April 2003, in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 120.

¹⁴¹ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 121.

¹⁴² Gistela (2004). *Golden Hair*, 21 July 2004, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 121–22.

¹⁴³ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 122.

¹⁴⁴ Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground*, 130.

The Displacement of Zanan into Digital Form

The depth of this ecosystem became most visible at the moment of its most concentrated test. When the Press Supervisory Council closed *Zanan* in January 2008, the response was swift and revealing. Asieh Amini, one of the magazine's contributors, characterised the closure as an "execution of the word." She accepted the formal charge that *Zanan* had disturbed the "psychological security" of the country, but argued that the place of the accused had been swapped: it was not the magazine that threatened that security, she insisted, but the social reality the magazine reflected.¹⁴⁵ Leila Moori, on her blog *Raha* (رها – Free), described *Zanan* as one of the most influential publications in her life and expressed her sorrow for a generation of young Iranian women for whom the magazine could have functioned as a window onto a new world at a moment when "everything reeks of hopelessness."¹⁴⁶ Nilofar Rostami posted a personal account titled "No one will send SMS on Monday morning, again," recalling how she would no longer receive texts from editors of the magazine asking where her overdue report was, how she had always been bad at meeting deadlines but had reported best when writing for *Zanan*, and how on a cold afternoon in January, the editor Shahla Sherkat had "lost a dear one aged sixteen."¹⁴⁷ Two weeks after the closure, the editorial board of the magazine launched its own weblog under the name "Editorial board of *Zanan*" to continue the work the print version had been forced to abandon.¹⁴⁸ The closure had not silenced the publication. It had displaced it. The printed magazine was gone, but the network of journalists, contributors, and readers it had constructed over sixteen years now had a digital infrastructure on which to reconstitute itself, which led to the opening of *Zanan-e Emrooz*, which shall be discussed in a following chapter.

From Banned Newsrooms to Citizen Journalism: De-professionalisation and the Reorganisation of Journalistic Labour

The Citizen Journalist as Structural Figure

The migration of journalism into digital forms was a transformation of the labour conditions under which journalism was produced. The form that transformation took was, on close examination, less an emancipation of journalists than a reorganisation of journalism around informal, unpaid, and structurally precarious arrangements. The closure of newspapers during the Khatami years and their continued attrition under Ahmadinejad meant the construction of websites carrying news, editorials and material unavailable through regime-controlled channels.¹⁴⁹ The figure that emerged from this displacement was the "citizen journalist", a category whose theoretical promise Sreberny and Khiabany examine with appropriate scepticism. Citizen journalism, in their formulation, challenges central aspects of the classic paradigm of journalistic activity, including professional training and recognition, paid work, unionised labour, and behaviour that is often politically neutral and unaffiliated, at least in claim if not in actuality. Citizen journalists are, by contrast, "often untrained, unpaid, non-unionised and highly politicised." This is not a celebratory description, but rather a diagnosis of a structural transformation, during which gains made in expressive freedom and political engagement came at the cost of labour protections, professional norms, and economic stability.

¹⁴⁵ Amini, A. (2008). [blog post], cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 124.

¹⁴⁶ Moori, L (2008). *Raha*, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 124.

¹⁴⁷ Rostami, N. (2008). "No One Will Send SMS on Monday Morning, Again", cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 124.

¹⁴⁸ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 124.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

The Trade-Union Dimension and the Fragility of Professional Infrastructure

The conditions that produced this transformation were already present in the structure of the Iranian press economy before the digital migration accelerated it. The Iranian press market reflects the broader configuration of the Iranian political economy, marked on one side by the presence of massive state-owned corporations and on the other by petty production and small enterprises.¹⁵⁰ The other model of ownership, often misrecognised as private, is in fact the individual ownership of newspapers by former ministers, MPs, and officials who have turned to the press market to promote themselves and their policies through some of the country's best-known dailies. Neither pole of this configuration was conducive to the development of journalism as an autonomous profession. The lack of job security, the poor pay, the difficult working conditions, and the state's control of broadcasting and the press all affected journalism training. The emergence of the semi-independent press, the internet, and the renewed struggles for a more open and democratic society waged by workers, students, women, and ethnic minorities had created, by the 2000s, a renewed interest in media training,¹⁵¹ but this interest was developing in conditions where the institutional infrastructure for sustaining a stable journalistic profession remained fragile.

The trade-union dimension of this fragility framed everything else. Prior to the revolution, the only organisation representing media workers had been the Syndicate of Newspaper Writers and Reporters, established in 1962 with government backing. After the revolution, the new regime announced that there was no need for syndicates while permitting the formation of associations. Only in 1997, after the landslide victory of Khatami, was the Association of Iranian Journalists established, reaching over two thousand print journalist members by 2005. The fragility of this representation became starkly apparent in June 2008 when, as part of the general incursion on civil liberties and social movement activities under Ahmadinejad, the Iranian government threatened to dissolve the journalist association and tried to remove its executive committee in order to replace them with conservative journalists.¹⁵²

The displacement of the already fragile professional structure into the digital environment took several distinct forms. Censorship and control drove publishers, writers, journalists, and ordinary readers alike to the internet to find and to provide information, to debate, and to make space for expression. Some created web-based publications. Others assembled collectives of writers that behaved in many respects like a press room, with editorial division of labour and coordinated publishing strategies, but without the formal legal status, the financial infrastructure, or the labour relations that defined a print newsroom. Yet others clustered in *halghe*, circles of individual bloggers connected by mutual reading and informal collaboration. These were forms of writing that were "unpaid, sometimes anonymised, and self-organising." State repression, far from extinguishing journalistic activity, functioned as a "galvanising force for political communication." However, the journalism it galvanised was one whose practitioners had no contracts, no health coverage, no professional recognition, and no recourse against the state that increasingly targeted them as individuals.

The Geographical Bifurcation of the Iranian Journalistic Field

The reversibility of trajectories between print journalism, blogging, and exile-based journalism in international media became, by the end of the decade, a defining characteristic of the Iranian journalistic field. Many journalists became bloggers, while other bloggers became journalists, especially outside Iran. The launch of the BBC Persian television network in January 2009 was emblematic of the latter movement: the channel employed the female blogger Lady Sun, whose

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 165.

digital trajectory has been examined in the previous section. What these careers had in common was a structural feature with significant analytical implications: the same individuals who had been criminalised by the Iranian state for their journalism inside Iran became, when relocated abroad, the very labour force on which international Persian-language broadcasting depended. The state had produced its own diaspora of digital adepts, who would now address Iranian audiences from outside the regulatory perimeter of the Islamic Republic. This was, in one sense, a form of professionalisation, with journalists acquiring new positions, payment, contracts, and support by an institutional infrastructure. But it was a professionalisation premised on exile, on the abandonment of the country whose public sphere their work had been intended to constitute. Those who remained in Iran wrote in conditions of precarity and exposure, while those who managed to leave sometimes found professional employment but lost their immediate connection to both their readership and their country.

Early Digital Surveillance and Adaptive Strategies

The Institutional Architecture of Internet Control

The emergence of *Weblogistan* did not catch the Iranian state unprepared. From the earliest moments of mass internet adoption, the regime developed a multi-layered apparatus of surveillance, filtering, and direct repression that, by the middle of the 2000s, had made Iran one of the most heavily controlled digital environments in the world. A 2005 report by the OpenNet Initiative argued that Iran, alongside China, was among a small group of states with the most sophisticated state-mandated filtering systems globally.¹⁵³ The technical, legal, and social architecture of this surveillance, however, did not function as the seamless mechanism its blueprints suggested. The practices and digital capacities of the population were developing faster than the regulatory apparatus could absorb, while surveillance remained contested throughout this period and was forced to adapt.

The institutional architecture of Iranian internet control was established progressively through the early 2000s. On 7 November 2001, the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, a conservative-dominated body, declared that ISPs (*Internet Service Providers*) must remove anti-government and “anti-Islamic” sites from their servers and that all internet service providers be placed under state control.¹⁵⁴ The subsequent layering of regulatory authority produced a system in which, in each *Ostan* (province), a committee composed of representatives of the Telecommunications Company of Iran, the office of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a district attorney, the internet café guild, and a representative of IRIB controlled the activities of net cafés, with the committee’s decisions regarding violations of the internet law treated as final.¹⁵⁵ The blacklist mechanism developed in parallel: a BBC report announced in 2003 that a list of fifteen thousand sites had already been drawn up by the government and sent to ISPs to be blocked, and in December 2003 the Iranian government finally admitted that such a blacklist existed.¹⁵⁶ Under pressure while attending the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva, President Khatami insisted that the country only blocked access to 240 “pornographic and immoral” websites rather than the reported fifteen thousand, claiming that the ban applied only to those sites incompatible with Islam and that “all political sites are free.” A government official added that the blacklist would be published. It never was, but external monitoring organisations tracked the filtering process and maintained their own continuously updated lists of banned sites.

¹⁵³ OpenNet Initiative. (2005). “2005 report”, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 70.

¹⁵⁴ Semati, M. (2008). *Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, 46.

¹⁵⁵ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 69.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

Repression, Infrastructural Measures, and the Case of Fereshteh Ghazi

The repressive episodes that punctuated this period demonstrated the regime's willingness to translate digital surveillance into direct action against individuals. The state's clampdown intensified in 2004, when Iranian authorities arrested and imprisoned dozens of bloggers, charging them with crimes such as espionage and disrespecting the Islamic Republic. Many of those detained subsequently appeared on television to confess to their alleged crimes.¹⁵⁷ Filtering operations expanded in parallel, targeting individual blogs as well as Persian-language news sites, human rights organisations, gay sites, and proxy services. Reporters Without Borders maintained an ongoing list of bloggers and journalists who had been arrested, imprisoned, and, most recently, had died in prison.¹⁵⁸

The personal cost of this repression is most legible at the level of individual cases. The young online journalist Fereshteh Ghazi was arrested in the autumn of 2004 and held for over forty days in solitary confinement. After her release she wrote on her blog: "Our first sin was to open the window, the other to destroy the wall."¹⁵⁹ Another blogger who had also been subjected to intimidation and arrest, Hanif, replied: "One other sin is our youth, because we do not accept at face value every nonsensical, irrational word."¹⁶⁰ The exchange registered, with unusual precision, the generational character of the confrontation: it was the young who had taken up the new medium, and it was the young who were paying the price.

Ghazi's own testimony, posted forty days after her release, conveys the texture of detention as the regime's apparatus inscribed itself on the individual writing body:

*It is exactly forty days since my release from that damning hell, but I have not been able to overcome the horrible nightmarish hell of solitary confinement, feeling brutally naked and losing all sense of values one keeps dear. It is in those frightening moments of the dark cell in the mysterious silence that one hears the inner voice of God that gives one strength to go on, to realise the power of the pen, to see the pointless interrogations, insults, injuries, threats, beatings and all that as trivial – and to become more determined not to be silenced. To write and write: in newspapers, on the weblogs, on sites, on doors, on walls and on any space one can find – no matter how difficult the situation.*¹⁶¹

The passage is significant not only as testimony but as theory: the surfaces of inscription Ghazi enumerates – newspapers, weblogs, sites, doors, walls – are exactly the surfaces whose proliferation the regime's apparatus had been unable to govern. Her commitment to write on "any space one can find" articulates the fearless voice through which Iranian women journalists continued to expand their reach even as institutional supports were dismantled.

In October 2006, the Ministry of Communications issued regulations which showed the regime's strategic use of infrastructural rather than directly punitive measures. These regulations ordered all ISPs in Iran to limit their download speeds to 128 kbps for all residential clients and internet cafés.¹⁶² The intent was twofold: to limit users' ability to download foreign cultural products, particularly music and films, and to constrain the organisation of political opposition, which had come to depend increasingly on rapid digital communication. The blogger Parastoo Dokoohaki, in an interview with the *Guardian*, identified the political logic of the move with precision: if you wanted to announce a gathering in advance, she observed, you would not see it mentioned on

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42, 49.

¹⁵⁸ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 74.

¹⁵⁹ Ghazi, F. quoted in Nouraie-Simone, F. (2010). *On Shifting Ground*, 128.

¹⁶⁰ Hanif, quoted in Nouraie-Simone, F. (2010). *On Shifting Ground*, 128.

¹⁶¹ Ghazi, quoted in Nouraie-Simone, F. (2010). *On Shifting Ground*, 129.

¹⁶² Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan* 72.

official websites, and newspapers would announce it too late, so you would upload it anonymously and circulate the information that way; banning high-speed links would limit that capacity. The state, Dokoochaki concluded, despite having the telecommunications facilities, the fibre-optic technology, and the internet infrastructure, “want us to be undeveloped.”¹⁶³ Bandwidth, in this analysis, had become a political variable. A quantitative limit on download speed functioned, in effect, as a qualitative limit on the capacity for collective action.

The keyword censorship of this surveillance apparatus operated through mechanisms whose practical absurdity revealed the priorities of the regime that designed them. Many Iranians used prepaid cards to access the internet, but the cards were designed so that searching for terms such as “women,” “birth,” or “sex” using search engines like Google was rendered impossible, regardless of whether the search was related to science, history, or literature.¹⁶⁴ The campaign against this restriction took the form of a slogan adopted by a large number of bloggers: “censorship is indecent, not women”. This turned the regime’s own moral vocabulary against the policy it had issued. Crackdowns on internet cafés operated as a parallel mechanism. Some of the earliest crackdowns in May 2001 closed four hundred cafés on the grounds that they did not have permits. Regular renewals of this regulatory pressure followed. The decrease in the number of internet cafés that emerged by the mid-2000s, however, was not exclusively the product of state action. It also reflected a transition in user behaviour, with the acquisition of personal computers by middle-class Iranians paving the way for a more private mode of internet consumption that the café-based regulatory framework was poorly equipped to govern.¹⁶⁵

The Failed Registration Plan of 2006–2007

The most ambitious and most revealing of the regime’s regulatory attempts during this period was the 2006–2007 plan to require all bloggers and website owners to register their sites with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In 2006 the presidential cabinet approved a plan put forth by the deputy minister of culture under the bylaws that justified the registration requirement on the grounds of “the People’s right to free and healthy access to information and knowledge,” “support for legal sites spreading information,” “respect for social rights and the protection of the country’s Islamic, national, cultural, and social views,” and “the civil and criminal liability of persons for their activities.”¹⁶⁶ Less than six months after the bylaws were passed, the Ministry gave bloggers and site owners a two-month window to register. The plan attracted immediate media attention inside and outside Iran and a series of negative responses. Omid Memarian argued in a BBC interview that the new law would only encourage more bloggers to go underground.¹⁶⁷ Lady Sun, responding to why she had not commented on the law, employed a well-known proverb – “*Javab-e ablahan khamushi ast*,” “the best answer to stupid people is silence” – and pointed out that “if they want to continue to filter us as they have already done and will do, why should we bother to go register our blog?”¹⁶⁸ Leila Mouri, in her blog *Raha*, questioned what she saw as a problematic silence in the *blogistan*: she worried about the vagueness and general wording of the new law, observing that “it is precisely this vagueness which is always used to silence the press and now the target is websites and blogs.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Dokoochaki, P. Interview with the *Guardian*, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 72.

¹⁶⁴ Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 78.

¹⁶⁵ Semati, M. (2008). *Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, 40.

¹⁶⁶ Akhavan, N. (2013). *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 53.

¹⁶⁷ Memarian, O. [BBC interview], cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 80.

¹⁶⁸ Dolatshahi, S. (Lady Sun), cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 81.

¹⁶⁹ Mouri, L. *Raha*, cited in Sreberny and Khiabany, (2010). *Blogistan*, 81.

The bloggers' collective response was decisive. Soon after the announcement of the plan, bloggers openly declared that they would defy the call to provide their information, with many decorating their blogs with the logo "I will not register."¹⁷⁰ The numerical outcome of this defiance was, by any measure, an institutional defeat for the Ministry. The non-compliance rate of more than 98 percent was not simply a refusal to obey a particular regulation. It was a collective demonstration, by an unorganised and unaffiliated population of digital writers, that the regulatory apparatus the state had constructed for the print press could not be straightforwardly transposed onto the digital environment. The state had assumed it could license and identify bloggers in the way it had licensed and identified newspaper editors. It had failed.

Adaptive Strategies and the Displacement of Political Activity

The adaptive strategies that bloggers and internet users developed in this environment were, in their accumulated form, constitutive of the digital culture that emerged. Proxy servers allowed users to bypass filtering by routing connections through hosts that answered address resolution protocol requests intended for other computers, enabling access to prohibited sites while using state-approved ISPs. The use of pseudonyms and false identities online complicated the regime's ability to identify and prosecute individual dissidents.¹⁷¹ The cumulative effect of this surveillance-and-resistance dynamic, however, must not be understood only at the level of the digital infrastructure itself. Especially from 2005 under the presidency of Ahmadinejad, all forms of independent face-to-face discussion had become harder and harder to organise.¹⁷² By the autumn of 2008, even the difficulties of organising a regular discussion group had become acute: it was hard to find a public space for such activities, universities would not provide rooms, and repeated group activity in private spaces attracted unwanted attention, with people worrying about what neighbours would think and whether they would be reported. An ongoing refrain among ordinary people in late 2008 was that the regime had managed to break social trust and to create a profound sense of surveillance over it as such. The political consequence of this closure of physical public space was, paradoxically, the displacement of political activity into the very digital environment the regime had been most concerned to control. By severely controlling public space, the regime pushed activity into private spaces that were, in many respects, far harder to control given the sheer multiplicity of locations involved. The internet thus became the space for political debate at the moment when other forums such as the press and face-to-face embodied politics had been suppressed. By keeping people indoors with little to do but engage with computers, the regime helped to induce a generation of digital adepts whose competence and networks would surface, six years after the first wave of blogger arrests, in the post-electoral mobilisation of June 2009.

Nouraie-Simone captures the broader significance of what had taken shape: "Weblogestan, a lively, interconnected community and public space where self-expression, exchange of information and personal transformation can take place, is a "street corner" of ideas with a vital potential. The borderless nature of the internet has introduced an opportunity for public dialogue in a new communication environment – an interaction that opens the potential for transformation. By connecting local conditions to global forces by means of new media, young Iranians are challenging the authoritarian measures that limit individual rights and civil liberties. Concepts such as democracy, human rights, feminism and civil society are familiar to them, and they are open to debate and discussion through online journals and weblogs."¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Akhavan, *Electronic Iran*, 56.

¹⁷¹ Semati, M. (2008). *Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, 51.

¹⁷² Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 116.

¹⁷³ Nouraie-Simone, F. (2010). *On Shifting Ground*, 139.

Conclusion

The decade between 2000 and 2009 produced one of the most striking displacements in the recent history of Iranian journalism and political communication. The reformist press whose flourishing the previous chapter examined was, by the middle of the 2000s, structurally dismantled. Through the coordinated deployment of judicial, legal, and extra-legal instruments more than eighty publications were closed by 2002, the relaunching of banned titles was criminalised, and *Zanan* was eventually closed in January 2008. The regime had succeeded in shutting the institutional space that the brief Khatami opening had momentarily made available. Yet the same decade saw the emergence – on a scale that had not been anticipated by either the regime or its critics – of a parallel digital ecosystem in which much of what print journalism had been forbidden to do was carried out instead. *Weblogistan* hosted forms of feminist debate, personal testimony, religious critique, and political organising that the print press had been unable to sustain. It did so through an architecture of “small media” whose low cost and decentralised character were structurally suited to the conditions of an Iranian society in which capital-intensive media production had become politically inaccessible to anyone outside the regime’s ideological perimeter.

The transformation, however, was not a simple substitution of one medium for another. The labour conditions of journalism were reorganised in ways whose long-term consequences remain unresolved: the figure of the “citizen journalist,” celebrated in much of the contemporary literature, designated in practice a workforce that was untrained, unpaid, and non-unionised, sustained by an enthusiasm and a political commitment that no professional infrastructure recognised or protected. The trajectories of individual journalists between print, blogging, and exile-based international broadcasting bifurcated the Iranian journalistic field along a geographical line that the regime’s repressive apparatus had drawn but not openly acknowledged. In 2006–2007, the 98 per cent non-compliance rate with the registration plan demonstrated that the regulatory framework developed for the print press could not be straightforwardly extended to the digital environment.

What emerged from this decade, then, was neither the death of Iranian journalism that the closures of 2000 and 2008 had announced, nor the emancipated cyber-public that some early commentators had projected onto the rise of *Weblogistan*. It was something more complex: a hybrid configuration in which print and digital, professional and amateur, domestic and exile-based forms of journalism coexisted in unstable arrangements whose political consequence depended on the particular conditions of each moment. In June 2009, the mobilisation would expose both the importance of the digital infrastructure that the preceding decade had produced and the limits of its political capacity. But the conditions for that moment had been laid over the previous ten years through the daily practices of bloggers writing under their own names or pseudonyms; editorial collectives reconstituting closed magazines as digital platforms; activists building feminist sites that the state could filter but not erase; and ordinary users developing the technical literacy required to circumvent a surveillance apparatus that had already been outpaced by the practices of the population it sought to govern.

IV. From the 2009 Rupture to the Eve of 2022: Women Journalists, Feminist Editorial Experiments, and Hybrid Practices (2009–2021)

Concepts: Reformist campaign; Citizen photojournalism; Visual regime; Iconisation; Conditional reopening; Editorial negotiation; Gendered red lines; Hybrid digital journalism; Curation; Image-event; Iconographic repertoire; Journalism by other means

Introduction

The twelve years between the contested re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009 and the year before the death of Mahsa Jina Amini were crucial. Seen from the vantage point of the 2022 events of Woman, Life, Freedom, the years after 2009 can look like an antechamber, a long wait before the next uprising. This chapter resists that reading to argue that the years in between were formative: a period in which several distinct modalities of women's media practice took shape, consolidated, and learned to coexist.

The arc opens with the election of June 2009. The reformist campaign placed women journalists and the women's-rights movement at the centre of an officially sanctioned contest. Zahra Rahnavard, Mir-Hossein Mousavi's wife, campaigned openly at his side, addressed women as a constituency, and gave the women's press a subject it had rarely been able to cover from inside such a campaign. The crackdown that followed the vote closed that space. It hollowed out the reformist dailies where women had built careers, and it did so along a gendered fault line. The detailed reconstruction of that repression, the arrests, the show trials, the targeting of individual signatures, will be examined in a later part of this study; what concerns the present chapter is the field the crackdown left behind.

Out of the same weeks came the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, filmed on a mobile phone and seen around the world within hours. The chapter keeps the figure of Neda not for its own sake but for what it set in place: a way of documenting state violence through the body of a young woman, and an iconographic template that would be reactivated thirteen years later around Mahsa Jina Amini.

The rest of the chapter follows the modalities that developed under the conditional moderation of the Rouhani years. The first was legal and editorial: Shahla Sherkat's relaunch of a licensed feminist magazine, *Zanan-e Emrooz*, and the constant negotiation it demanded. The second was digital and hybrid: *My Stealthy Freedom*, the platform Masih Alinejad founded in exile, which turned the ordinary photograph of an unveiled woman into a journalistic form. The third was the coverage of a dispersed female insurgency, the Girls of Revolution Street of 2017 and 2018. A fourth – quieter modality than the others – emerges only at the chapter's close: the generation of women reporters who built their careers inside the reformist daily press.

All of these, taken together, formed an established female media ecosystem by the eve of 2022. The resources accumulated, an iconographic repertoire running from Neda to Vida Movahed, a body of imprisoned women writing from inside the prisons, a consolidated network of diasporic signatures, were conditions of possibility but not causes. The chapter ends on that distinction.

The Electoral Moment: Women Journalists at the Heart of the Reformist Campaign

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad opened his re-election campaign in the spring of 2009 with a confidence that, in retrospect, reads as miscalculation. So certain was he of victory that he permitted more

than a hundred foreign journalists into the country to observe what he expected would be his inauguration.¹⁷⁴ The campaign did not unfold as he had planned. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a reformer with a populist record who had served as Khomeini's wartime prime minister and had worked as a private architect since 1989, entered the race. A series of six prime-time televised debates galvanised the public and undermined the incumbent. His opponents took turns citing reliable statistics to undercut his own on inflation, unemployment, and poverty, and reproached him for isolating Iran from the international community.¹⁷⁵

For the purposes of this study, the decisive feature of the Mousavi candidacy was not the candidate himself but the configuration of figures and demands assembled around him. Mousavi ran on a modest reformist programme that promised greater freedom of media and expression, a more tolerant foreign policy, and gender equality. As Sreberny and Khiabany note, the gender-equality plank of that programme was devised by his wife, the academic and public campaigner Zahra Rahnavard.¹⁷⁶ Rahnavard's role marked a genuine departure. She campaigned openly alongside her husband, appeared at rallies, and was photographed holding his hand in public. It is worth recalling here that Rahnavard had once edited *Pooyandegan-e Rah-e Zeynab* (پویندگان راه زینب), the government women's weekly where Sherkat herself had begun her journalistic career. The woman now standing beside the reformist candidate belonged, in other words, to the same world of the women's press that the previous chapters of this study have traced.¹⁷⁷ Her visibility gave women journalists and the women's press something they had rarely been able to report on from inside an officially sanctioned campaign: a woman who was at once a candidate's spouse, an intellectual in her own right, and a campaigner who addressed women as a constituency.

Women Journalists and Activists as Actors in the Reformist Coverage

That constituency had organised itself deliberately. Drawing on the lessons of their years of activism, women's rights activists recognised, as Sanam Vakil observes, that boycotting elections, as they had done in 2005, had failed to bring attention to women's concerns. In 2009, they collaborated instead to compel each candidate to address gender issues and delineate a gender policy.¹⁷⁸ The filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad captured this mobilisation in her documentary *We Are Half of Iran's Population*, built around interviews with activists, which was screened for every presidential candidate except Ahmadinejad.¹⁷⁹ The women's movement also used the digital infrastructure it had built across the previous years – the network of feminist websites described in earlier chapters – to issue statements demanding women's rights and to support both Mousavi and Karoubi, a deliberately doubled endorsement adopted in case one candidate withdrew.¹⁸⁰ Women journalists were therefore not peripheral observers of the reformist campaign but actors within it, editorialising in the reformist dailies, interviewing the activists who were lobbying the candidates, and translating a diffuse set of gender demands into a programme that could be covered. The campaign even had its own newspaper, *Kalameh Sabz* (سبز کلمه – Green Word), which became one of the principal vehicles of this coverage.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Abrahamian, E. (2018). *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 254.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Sreberny, A. and Khiabany, G. (2010). *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 170.

¹⁷⁷ On Rahnavard's editorship of *Pooyandegan-e Rah-e Zeynab* and Sherkat's early career under her, see "Influential Iranian Women: Shahla Sherkat (1956–)", *IranWire*, 9 January 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Vakil, S. (2011). *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, New York: Continuum, 199.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁸⁰ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 171.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

A concrete instance is worth highlighting. When Rahnavard addressed a rally at Tabriz University, a correspondent recorded that she “warmed up the crowd,” ticking off her demands for women’s rights as the students roared “We love you, Rahnavard!” and her husband stood clapping in the wings.¹⁸² This detail matters because it captures what the women’s press was now able to cover not a candidate’s wife in the background, but a woman who, in almost every rally, spoke before her husband did and promised to keep her public voice if he won.¹⁸³ Among the journalists documenting this terrain was Jila Baniyaghoob, who reported on the campaign and its aftermath for the reformist press and edited the women’s-rights website *Focus on Iranian Woman*. The articles she wrote during the 2009 election would two years later become the stated grounds for her imprisonment and her thirty-year ban from the profession.¹⁸⁴ The women covering the campaign were thus reporting on an expansion of women’s political visibility that they themselves embodied, and they would be punished for.

The Post-electoral Break and the Closure of the Reformist Press

The break, when it came, was abrupt. The interior ministry, staffed by Ahmadinejad supporters, declared the incumbent re-elected with sixty-three percent of the vote. The opposition pointed to a long series of gross irregularities. This included constituencies in which more than a hundred percent of the electorate had supposedly voted, where ballot boxes were moved to the interior ministry rather than being counted locally, where unofficial ballots were printed, at the fourteen thousand mobile polling stations set up, and where opposition observers had been barred from polling stations.¹⁸⁵ The protest that followed was, in its early days, overwhelmingly a movement of the urban middle class, marching under the slogan “Where is my vote?” The government answered with a crackdown endorsed by the Supreme Leader, who praised the official result as a “divine gift.”¹⁸⁶ Tens of thousands of Revolutionary Guards and members of the *Basij* were deployed; public meetings were banned; Mousavi and Karoubi were placed under house arrest; over four thousand of their associates were detained; and more than a hundred reformists were paraded through a show trial in which they “confessed” to a foreign-engineered “velvet coup.”¹⁸⁷

For the women’s press specifically, the months after the elections functioned as an instrument of erasure. As Sreberny and Khiabany record, the authorities kept foreign journalists sequestered in hotel rooms until their visas expired, censored *Kalameh Sabz*, and arrested many of those associated with the Green campaign; according to Reporters Without Borders, Iran by the end of 2009, had surpassed China as the world’s biggest prison for journalists.¹⁸⁸ The reformist dailies that had carried women’s signatures were suspended or closed, and the business daily *Sarmayeh*, where a number of reform-minded journalists worked, was shuttered, with its editorial staff scattered into detention or unemployment.¹⁸⁹ These closures did not strike female signatures by accident. They struck them because women journalists were concentrated precisely in the

¹⁸² “Candidate’s Wife a New Political Star in Iran,” *Associated Press*, reproduced by *NBC News*, (2009).

¹⁸³ “Candidate’s Wife a New Political Star in Iran,” *Associated Press / NBC News*. On Rahnavard breaking precedent as the first candidate’s wife to campaign publicly in the history of the Islamic Republic; see also: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. (2010). “Silencing the Women’s Rights Movement in Iran”.

¹⁸⁴ Bani-Yaghoob, Z. (2013). “Release Iranian Journalist Bani-Yaghoob,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, *Voice of America*, 2 May 2013.

¹⁸⁵ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 254.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 176, 178.

¹⁸⁹ On the closures and the position of *Sarmayeh*, see Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*, 176; and Amnesty International, (2012). “Iran Must Release Prisoner of Conscience Zhila Bani-Yaghoob”, 6 September 2012.

reformist and women's rights segment of the press that the crackdown was designed to dismantle, and because, as the following chapters will show, the repressive apparatus had come to regard the conjunction of "woman" and "journalist" as a category of heightened threat. The journalist and analyst Omid Memarian, himself a veteran of the Iranian reformist press, would later argue that the Green Movement, far from being extinguished by this repression, never truly went away but instead dispersed into the texture of Iranian social life, resurfacing in the mobilisations of the following decade.¹⁹⁰ The electoral moment had briefly widened the space available to women's media practice, but the rupture that followed closed it, and did so along a gendered fault line.

The Death of Neda Agha-Soltan and the Iconographic Template

On the evening of 20 June 2009, eight days after the election, a twenty-seven-year-old woman named Neda Agha-Soltan was fatally wounded by a single gunshot to the chest near the site of a demonstration in Tehran. No one was ever legally charged with the killing, although it is widely believed that the sniper belonged to the *Basij* volunteer militia.¹⁹¹ Neda was not a protester in any organised sense, and was not, in any professional sense, the subject of a news story. Her death was filmed on mobile phones and circulated online within hours to a global audience. Her death inaugurated what this chapter defines as a new visual language: the body of a woman, killed in a public square, recorded by an anonymous bystander becomes the major iconography for documenting state repression.

The route the footage travelled is itself worth recalling, because it would prove structurally durable. As Mette Mortensen reconstructs the sequence, the first recording was posted to Facebook and YouTube by an Iranian asylum seeker in the Netherlands after a friend in Tehran telephoned and asked him to publish the footage. A still image from a second, anonymous close-up became the most widely reproduced image of the entire crisis.¹⁹² The mobile-phone video bypassed every institutional gatekeeper: it required no editor, no press card, no newsroom, only a small device, a network connection that had not yet been severed, and a contact abroad willing to publish. This mattered acutely in a country operating one of the most sophisticated centralised online filtering systems in the world, where access to YouTube and Facebook was shut down during the election period and protesters' phones were confiscated to prevent the circulation of images.¹⁹³

The gendered specificity of the icon is central to the imagery of Iranian state repression. The image which crystallised the movement was that of a dying woman. Western coverage presented Neda as the embodiment of a democratic aspiration, attaching to her the hope invested in a generation of young, educated Iranian women emerging despite the constraints on women's rights.¹⁹⁴ The female body, killed in a public square and recorded without her knowledge, became the surface onto which a political meaning was projected. This established an iconographic template – a young woman's body, a name that becomes a slogan, a face that becomes a movement's unifying symbol – that would prove transposable across more than a decade.

Continuity ran deeper than the image. Thirteen years later, when another young woman died in the custody of the Iranian state, it would be two female journalists, Niloufar Hamedei and Elahieh Mohammadi, who broke the story. Once again, the state would answer not only with a prison

¹⁹⁰ Memarian, O. (2019). "The Green Movement Never Went Away", *Foreign Affairs*.

¹⁹¹ Mortensen, M. (2011). "When Citizen Photojournalism Sets the News Agenda: Neda Agha Soltan as a Web 2.0 Icon of Post-Election Unrest in Iran," *Global Media and Communication*, 7(1), 6.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

sentence but with the accusation that they were foreign agents.¹⁹⁵ The chapters that follow trace the distance between these two moments.

The Rouhani Moment and the Conditional Reopening for the Women's Press

The Rhetoric of Moderation and the Duality of Power

The election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 was accompanied by a rhetoric of moderation that extended, in principle, to the media. After eight years of Ahmadinejad's presidency and the post-2009 crackdown, the prospect of a government less openly hostile to the press raised expectations of a reopening. For the women's press, however, the reopening that materialised was strictly conditional, and understanding that conditionality is the precondition for understanding everything that follows in this chapter.

The central feature of the Rouhani period, for the purposes of this study, was the duality of power. The executive, and specifically the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, could authorise a publication, issue or restore a licence, and signal a degree of tolerance. But the judiciary, the security apparatus, and the Press Supervisory Board operated on a separate track, and could suspend, summon, prosecute, and detain individuals regardless of what the ministry had authorised. A licence granted by one arm of the state was no protection against another. This duality is not an incidental administrative detail. For women's media practices across the decade, this structural condition meant that every editorial gain was provisional, and any permission could be revoked at any moment.

The Specifically Gendered Red Lines

The reopening was also gendered in its limits. The red lines that the women's press encountered were not only the generic red lines of Iranian journalism, the Supreme Leader, the security forces, the nuclear file, but a specific cluster of prohibitions concerning the family, sexuality, and the body. As the previous chapters of this study have shown, even *Zanan* and other journals in the boldest years of the reformist press had been careful to avoid the question of compulsory veiling. The gendered red line was an old feature of the women's press, not a Rouhani-era invention. What the conditional reopening did was confirm that this perimeter remained in force. A reformist Ministry of Culture might tolerate a women's magazine in the abstract while the judiciary moved against it the moment its coverage touched the legal status of the family or the question of sexual autonomy. Asef Bayat's analysis of Iran's condition as a society after 2009 – describing dispersed, sub-institutional changes rather than organised movements – presents a useful frame. The women's press of the Rouhani years operated not as a movement but as a set of negotiated and fragile footholds. Each of these footholds was exposed to reversal.¹⁹⁶

A Shifting Media Environment: The Migration to Messaging Platforms

It would be a mistake, however, to read the decade only as one of constraint, since it was also a decade of migration onto new platforms. While the licensed print press negotiated its narrow perimeter, political communication was moving rapidly onto messaging applications, and women were part of that movement as both producers and audiences. Mahsa Alimardani and Stefania Milan, studying the 2016 parliamentary elections, describe how the chat application Telegram

¹⁹⁵ "Iran: Journalists Who Covered Mahsa Amini's Death Sentenced to Prison", International Press Institute, 7 November 2023.

¹⁹⁶ Bayat, A. (2017). *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

became central to the way Iranians accessed political information, valued above all for the speed with which it circulated material. One of their interviewees described going to bed and waking up to fifty notifications, some of them political, whereas in the past one had to wait through slow internet connections or satellite broadcasts to be informed.¹⁹⁷ The same study notes that Twitter had entered mass Iranian usage in the first place through the Green Movement of 2009.¹⁹⁸ The point matters for this chapter because it situates the legal women's press of the Rouhani years within a media environment that was being reshaped underneath it. The print magazine was negotiating its survival at the very moment that the audience it had once addressed was migrating to platforms the Ministry of Culture did not license and could not easily close. The annual reporting of the Committee to Protect Journalists across the period confirms the harder edge of this environment. Even under a self-described moderate president, Iran remained one of the world's leading jailers of journalists.¹⁹⁹

The 2014 Wave of Arrests: Moderation and its Limits

If the relaunch of *Zanan-e Emrooz* in 2014 seemed to confirm the promise of the Rouhani "reopening," the same year supplied its sharpest refutation. Across the spring and summer of 2014, barely a year into the presidency that had been elected on a platform of media moderation, a cluster of women journalists were summoned to Evin Prison to begin or resume sentences, in what Reporters Without Borders described, in a headline that doubles as a diagnosis, as evidence that Iran had become the world's leading jailer of female journalists.²⁰⁰ The documentary filmmaker and journalist Mahnaz Mohammadi entered prison on 7 June to begin a five-year sentence; the reformist journalist Reyhaneh Tabatabai was returned to prison on 21 June; and the arts-and-culture reporter Marzieh Rasouli reported to Evin on 8 July.²⁰¹ The independent political correspondent Saba Azarpeik had already been detained since 28 May, held at an undisclosed location and, for weeks, allowed contact with her family only once.²⁰²

What makes this wave analytically useful, rather than merely a list of names, is the way it exposes the duality of power described above. The Ministry of Culture had licensed a feminist monthly in the same months that the judiciary and the Revolutionary Guards were imprisoning women reporters; the two arms of the state were moving in opposite directions at once, and the women's press occupied the gap between them. The charges, moreover, followed the now-familiar grammar of the press offence folded into the security offence. Rasouli announced on her own Twitter account that she had been convicted of "spreading propaganda against the ruling regime" and "disturbing public order" as a result of her participation in peaceful assemblies, a formulation, as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information observed, that "has been frequently used by the Iranian government to prosecute civil society activists, journalists and political leaders."²⁰³ Her sentence carried, in addition to two years' imprisonment, fifty lashes,

¹⁹⁷ Alimardani, M. and Milan, S. (2018). "The Internet as a Global/Local Site of Contestation: The Case of Iran," in Peeren, E. et al. eds. (2018). *Global Cultures of Contestation*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 9.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹⁹ Committee to Protect Journalists. "Annual Prison Censuses and Country Reports on Iran, 2013–2021".

²⁰⁰ "Iran Is World's Leading Jailer of Female Journalists and Netizens", *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)*, 28 July 2014.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*; On Tabatabai and Rasouli, see also: "Iran: Free or Charge Journalists", *Human Rights Watch*, 28 July 2014.

²⁰² "Iran: Journalist Held in Unknown Location; Fears for Safety", *PEN International*, reproduced by *PEN-Zentrum Deutschland*, 25 July 2014; "Saba Azarpeik, Crime: Journalism", *IranWire / Journalism Is Not a Crime*.

²⁰³ "Iranian Journalist Faces 2 Years in Jail for 'Spreading Propaganda' against Government", *Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)*, reproduced by *IFEX*, 14 July 2014.

a corporal penalty that human-rights organisations condemned as a form of torture prohibited under the conventions to which Iran is a party.²⁰⁴

Azarpeik's case is the most revealing of the group, because it shows precisely which kind of reporting the "moderate" state would not tolerate. She had been targeted, as the IranWire database documents, for her hard-hitting reports on the treatment of political prisoners and her coverage of the death of blogger Sattar Beheshti, who had died under torture in police custody in 2012; as the parliamentary correspondent for *Etemad* (اعتماد), she had reported accounts of a 2014 raid on Evin's Cell Block 350 directly to members of parliament, who then pursued the matter on the floor.²⁰⁵ A woman journalist reporting on the conditions of imprisonment was, in other words, herself imprisoned; the symmetry was not lost on her colleagues. The episode demonstrates that the limits of the conditional reopening were not abstract. They were enforced, in the same year the reopening was being celebrated, on the bodies and in the careers of the very women whose presence in the press the reopening was supposed to permit.

"Journalism Is Not a Crime": The Journalistic Community as Its Own Chronicler

The journalists subjected to this wave did not merely endure it; they documented it, and that documentation is itself a primary source for the period. In October 2014, one hundred and thirty-five Iranian reporters, editors, and media workers, writing from both inside and outside the country, addressed an open letter to President Rouhani, published in Persian by the diaspora outlet IranWire. The letter was prompted by Rouhani's claim, made to CNN's Christiane Amanpour during a visit to the United Nations, that he did not believe anyone in Iran was imprisoned for being a journalist. Its signatories answered with figures of their own: that since the disputed presidential election in 2009, almost 300 journalists had been arrested, that Iran held the highest number of women journalists in prison of any country, and that hundreds of Iranian journalists were forced to live in exile.²⁰⁶ The letter is worth dwelling on as an artifact, because it represents a form of collective authorship by the journalistic community itself: a refusal, signed and public, to allow the state's account of press freedom to stand unchallenged.

That impulse toward self-documentation was institutionalised in the same period. IranWire, founded in 2013 by the journalist Maziar Bahari, defined itself as a collaborative news website run by professional Iranian journalists in the diaspora and citizen journalists inside Iran, built on precisely the in-Iran-and-in-exile division of labour that this chapter has identified in *My Stealthy Freedom*. Its sister project, "Journalism Is Not a Crime," set out to compile a profile of every journalist imprisoned in Iran, on the stated principle that the names of detained reporters should circulate until none of us know the names of journalists behind bars in Iran because they have all been set free.²⁰⁷ For a study of women in the Iranian media, these projects matter on two counts. They were a significant site of women's journalistic work in the diaspora across the decade, and they constitute the archive through which the targeting of women journalists inside Iran became legible at all. The documentation of the repression was, in this period, itself a branch of women's journalism.

²⁰⁴ "Iranian Journalist Sentenced to 50 Lashes, 2 Years in Jail", *Times of Israel / Agence France-Presse*, 7 July 2014; On the lashing sentence as a violation of the prohibition on torture, see *PEN International's* call for Rasouli's release, 16 July 2014. Rasouli's sentence was reduced on appeal to one year, and she was released on 19 October 2014.

²⁰⁵ "Saba Azarpeik, Crime: Journalism", *IranWire / Journalism Is Not a Crime*.

²⁰⁶ "Iranian Journalists to Rouhani: 'Stop Lying'", *IranWire*, 2 October 2014.

²⁰⁷ "Journalism Is Not a Crime", *IranWire*; see also "Podcast: Why Journalism Is Not a Crime", *IranWire*, 2014.

Zanan-e Emrooz (2014): Relaunching a Feminist Press Under Constraint

Sherkat's Gamble of Return

The clearest test of the conditional reopening was the relaunch, in June 2014, of a licensed feminist monthly. *Zanan-e Emrooz* (Today's Women) was Shahla Sherkat's wager that the editorial project of *Zanan*, the magazine she had edited from 1992 until its closure in 2008, could be resumed within the system, under a new title and a new licence, without abandoning what had made it consequential. As earlier chapters of this study have shown, Sherkat had spent almost seven years after the banning of *Zanan* pursuing a licence for a new publication before one was finally granted; the relaunch was therefore not a sudden opportunity but the delayed result of a long administrative struggle.²⁰⁸ The name *Zanan-e Emrooz* is a clear reference to the original *Zanan*, as if Sherkat wanted to signal continuity with the banned magazine, demonstrating that years of censorship had not extinguished her project. The wager was lucid about its own terms. Sherkat herself described the practice of Iranian journalism in an image this study takes as emblematic of the entire decade: a form of tight-rope walking, an attempt to walk a fine line that respects state regulations while still seeking to reach an endpoint, conducted with almost no protection.²⁰⁹

The Editorial Line and the Question of the Sayable

In substance, *Zanan-e Emrooz* continued the work of its predecessor. Like *Zanan*, it was a Persian-language periodical addressing the political, social, and economic dimensions of women's rights, ranging across family rights, equal access to employment and education, and gender-related regional and global debates.²¹⁰ Its editorial line ran toward investigation, and toward exactly the subjects that the previous chapters identified as *Zanan's* territory: family law, violence against women, and the more dangerous ground of the body and sexuality. The question that organised the magazine's practice was the question of the sayable, what could be addressed openly, what had to be approached obliquely, and what remained, for the moment, entirely unsayable. Sherkat was explicit about this calculus. Because of the red lines, she explained, the magazine could not publicly tackle certain matters, but the editors and the experts who wrote for it would nonetheless discuss them internally, holding them in reserve against the possibility that an opportunity to address a previously forbidden issue might later arise.²¹¹ This is the practice the present chapter calls editorial negotiation: not self-censorship in the sense of simple silence, but a continuous, strategic management of timing and exposure.

The 2015 Suspension Over "White Marriage"

The state's sensitivity to the relaunch was immediate. Merely three months after the first issue, Sherkat was summoned to the Press Court to answer charges of promoting "obsolete" feminist views deemed un-Islamic, and conservative forces blamed the Rouhani administration for having licensed her at all, given what they characterised as her background and "deviant" views.²¹² The

²⁰⁸ "Iran's Leading Women's Magazine Suspended after Covering Cohabitation outside of Marriage", *Global Voices*, 4 May 2015.

²⁰⁹ Sherkat, S. (2015). [Personal Interview], June 2015, quoted in Tajali, M. (2023). "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Role of Women's Magazines," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Loubna H. Skalli and Nahed Eltantawy, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 208.

²¹⁰ Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 202.

²¹¹ Sherkat, S. et al. (2015). Quoted in Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 218.

²¹² Esfandiari, G. (2014). "Iranian Women's Monthly under Pressure from Hard-Liners", *Radio*

decisive episode came in the spring of 2015. In its October 2014 issue, *Zanan-e Emrooz* had published a cover feature on “white marriage,” *ezdevaj-e sefid*, the term used in Iran for unmarried cohabitation; the cover set an image of a woman and a man walking side by side in the street beside the question, “White marriage: affliction or treatment?”²¹³ On 27 April 2015, after only eleven issues, the Press Supervisory Board suspended the magazine and referred it for prosecution, citing content judged to be “against public chastity” under the Press Law and the “promotion” of a phenomenon contrary to religious and national values.²¹⁴ Sherkat learned of the suspension from a news agency website as the magazine was going to press; she said she had received no prior notice of any kind.²¹⁵

The choice of trigger is analytically eloquent, and it can be read directly against the history reconstructed in the earlier chapters of this study. Of all the subjects the magazine had addressed, the one that produced suspension concerned the family and sexual conduct directly. It crossed precisely the gendered red line that *Zanan* itself had spent sixteen years learning to navigate. The “white marriage” affair is therefore not merely an incident in the magazine’s history but a demonstration of where the perimeter lay and how little it took to breach it. It is worth adding that conservative outlets did not even regard “white marriage” as the sole offence; the hardline Fars News Agency suggested that the magazine’s articles on women’s rights and on women’s access to sports stadiums were further reasons for the ban, which only confirms how wide the gendered perimeter actually was.²¹⁶

The aftermath is equally instructive. The suspension proved temporary. Sherkat resumed publication in October 2015, and she did so through a combination of her own pressure and the support of official allies within the reformist camp, among them Shahindokht Molaverdi, the Vice-President for Women’s Affairs in Rouhani’s cabinet.²¹⁷ The episode thus illustrates both faces of the conditional reopening at once: the judiciary could suspend a feminist magazine over a single cover story, and a well-placed reformist ally could help restore it. Survival depended on access to the executive track of a divided state, and that dependence was not stable. A further suspension followed soon after the 2016 parliamentary elections, in which a reformist-backed list, including nearly all of the women it had fielded in the major cities, entered parliament; the conservative reaction extended to the magazine’s personnel and contributors, and the anthropologist and *Zanan-e Emrooz* contributor Homa Hoodfar was arrested by the Revolutionary Guards the night before she was due to fly home to Canada.²¹⁸ The pattern is consistent across the decade. As Mona Tajali observes, the repeated harassment and closure of *Zanan* and *Zanan-e Emrooz* was itself an index of their political impact, a measure of the degree to which conservative forces feared the capacity of such publications to publicise women’s demands and to mobilise voters.²¹⁹

Free Europe/Radio Liberty, retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-womens-monthly-under-pressure/26561137.html>; See also: Tajali “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, 212.

²¹³ “Iran Bans Women’s Magazine over Coverage of Cohabiting Couples,” *Middle East Eye*, 27 April 2015.

²¹⁴ “Managing Editor of Banned Women’s Publication Hopes for Reversal of Decision,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, 27 April 2015; “Influential Iranian Women: Shahla Sherkat (1956–),” *IranWire*, 9 January 2024.

²¹⁵ “Managing Editor of Banned Women’s Publication Hopes for Reversal of Decision,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Tajali, “Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 213.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The Magazine as a Feminist Intellectual Network

Two further dimensions complete the portrait. The first is sociological. *Zanan-e Emrooz* functioned, as *Zanan* had before it, as a node in a feminist intellectual network. Its contributors were not only journalists but sociologists, jurists, and activists, and the magazine operated as a meeting point at which scholarly expertise on women's rights, legal analysis, and activist experience were brought into a single editorial space. When the magazine devoted an issue to women's political representation, it did so by inviting precisely such contributions and interviews from scholars and activists working on the question.²²⁰ The second dimension is historical. The relaunch inscribed itself, whether or not it announced the fact, in the long history of the Iranian women's press that the first chapters of this study traced, the lineage running back through *Zan-e Ruz* to the early-twentieth-century periodicals such as *Danish* (دانش). The feminist magazine of 2014 was the latest instance of a form with more than a century of precedent, a form that had repeatedly served as the principal platform on which women's campaigns were publicised and women's political candidacy debated.

A Precarious Survival

That this form was, by the mid-2010s, operating against a structural headwind should not be understated. As Tajali notes, the launch of *Zanan-e Emrooz* coincided with a marked decline in a large part of society's interest in print media, as readers migrated to the internet and satellite television; the women's-rights concerns the magazine raised retained their political importance even as its print constituency contracted.²²¹ By 2015 its circulation had reached roughly ten thousand copies in print, and something on the order of fifty thousand readers once subscribers and online readers were counted.²²² Financial scarcity, compounded by sanctions and a weak economy, eventually forced the magazine to publish quarterly rather than monthly, with frequent irregularities, a downgrade that registers, in the most material way possible, the limits of what editorial negotiation could secure.²²³ The legal and editorial modality survived the decade. It did not flourish; it persisted, under constraint, as one component of a larger ecosystem.

Beyond Zanan-e Emrooz: The Narrowing Field of the Licensed Women's Press

Zanan-e Emrooz was the most prominent licensed feminist title of the decade, but it was not the only women's publication to test, and discover, the perimeter. The case of *Shirzanan* (شیرزنان) is instructive precisely because its subject seemed innocuous. Conceived as the first Iranian women's sports weekly, with an all-women editorial board including the photographer Maryam Majd, the magazine aimed, in its own words, to fill the lack of news coverage in the national media on women's sports in Iran.²²⁴ That a magazine devoted to women athletes should have required, by its editors' account, a four-year bureaucratic struggle before its proposal was ultimately rejected says a great deal about where the gendered red lines fell. Women's sport was not a marginal topic but a flashpoint, the same terrain on which *Zanan-e Emrooz* would later be charged over its coverage of women's access to stadiums. The trajectory of *Shirzanan*, which subsequently re-established itself as a diaspora-based platform, also rehearses in miniature the in-Iran-to-exile migration that structured so much of women's media work in this decade, and to which the chapter now turns.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²²² Sherkat, S. et al. (2015), cited in Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 203.

²²³ Tajali, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 218.

²²⁴ Shirzanan. [Entry drawing on the magazine's own editorial statements]; See the *Shirzanan* organisation's account of its founding.

My Stealthy Freedom and the Expression of a Hybrid Digital Journalism

Masih Alinejad and the Launch of the Platform

If *Zanan-e Emrooz* represents the legal and editorial modality at its limit, *My Stealthy Freedom* represents something the Iranian journalistic field had no settled category for. It was founded in May 2014 by Masih Alinejad, a journalist who had been forced out of Iran in 2009 in the aftermath of her post-electoral reporting and had continued her work in exile, producing among other things a radio series on the victims of the 2009 crackdown and later presenting for Persian-language broadcasters abroad.²²⁵ The platform began almost casually. Alinejad posted a photograph of herself on Facebook, walking with her hair uncovered in the streets of London. She thought it was no great matter, but she received a flood of comments from women inside Iran who envied her freedom to feel the wind in her hair; she then posted a second photograph, this one taken stealthily inside Iran in earlier years, also without the compulsory hijab, and from the volume of images that women began to send her a campaign took shape, formalised as a Facebook page on 5 May 2014.²²⁶

The Ordinary Photograph as a Journalistic Form

The analytical interest of *My Stealthy Freedom* for our study of women and the Iranian media lies in the form it invented. Its raw material was the ordinary photograph of an unveiled Iranian woman, not a news photograph, not the work of a professional, but a snapshot produced by an anonymous contributor in a park, a street, a market. The platform's labour was the work of an editorial desk:

Receiving submissions, selecting among them, contextualising them, and publishing them to an audience. What Alinejad performed was, in functional terms, curation and editorialisation, the transformation of a stream of private images into a coherent, sustained, public account of a condition. This is why the platform resists clean classification. At the same time, it was a journalistic project, since it documented a social reality and circulated it to the public; an activist project as its explicit goal was to end compulsory veiling; and a participatory project with a content produced by its audience and not a newsroom.

By the end of 2016 the Facebook page had surpassed one million followers, and in 2017 the project generated an offshoot, the White Wednesdays campaign, which invited women to wear white, or to appear bare-headed, on Wednesdays as a recurring, calendrical act of protest.²²⁷

The Blurring of Professional Boundaries

The hybridity provoked debate within the Iranian journalistic field. If the journalist is the person who produces the report, who is the journalist when the platform aggregates anonymous contributions and the named figure at its centre is a curator in exile rather than a reporter on the ground? The question is not merely a matter of definition. *My Stealthy Freedom* page was undeniably consequential while fitting no existing definition. It also attracted sustained criticism, which deserves to be registered. Critics argued that the campaign risked provoking hardliners to tighten the mandatory hijab law and that the aggregation of anonymous images raised questions

²²⁵ "Masih Alinejad", [Biographical Profile], *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, "My Stealthy Freedom," (2015). *Geez Magazine*, 39.

²²⁶ "Our Story," *My Stealthy Freedom*, retrieved from:

<https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/our-story/>; The Facebook page was established on 5 May 2014.

²²⁷ "My Stealthy Freedom", *Geez Magazine*; On White Wednesdays: "Iran's 'Girls of Revolution Street' Risk Imprisonment to Protest Mandatory Hijab", *Global News*, 2018.

of consent and of risk for contributors who bore consequences that Alinejad as holder of the page did not. Furthermore, it was said by some that a curator based abroad could not legitimately claim to speak for women inside Iran. These criticisms do not settle the question of the platform's value, and this study does not attempt to do so either.

A Transnational Model

The following section focuses on the structural innovation. The model of *My Stealthy Freedom* followed a transnational division of labour, an editor based in exile and the documentary function distributed among contributors inside Iran. This model would prove durable and would be repeated in the following years. It is the same division of labour, the diaspora editorialising material gathered by women inside the country, that the chapter identified at the moment of Neda's death; *My Stealthy Freedom* turned an improvised arrangement into a standing institution. The significance of that model would become fully legible only when the next image-event arrived. It also laid the ground for the recurring theme that would be at the heart of women's rights preoccupation in the next year: compulsory hijab. From the silent movement of The Girls of Revolution Street to the death of Mahsa Jina Amini for a loose veil, the cracks were already visible.

The Girls of Revolution Street (2017–2018): Covering a Female Insurgency

On 27 December 2017, on Enghelab Street, Revolution Street, in central Tehran, a young woman and mother named Vida Movahed climbed onto a utility box, removed her white headscarf, tied it to a stick, and waved it, silently, above her uncovered head.²²⁸ She was arrested the same day and released roughly a month later.²²⁹ The gesture was widely associated with the White Wednesdays campaign and emerged within the broader anti-compulsory-hijab mobilisation it had helped amplify.²³⁰ Vida later described the gesture as a quiet form of rebellion, a bold gesture that came out of necessity to quietly rebel, to express her fearless voice through pacifist activism. This single act became a phenomenon. Quickly, photographs and videos of Movahed standing circulated online, hashtags flourished and people were asking where she was. In the following weeks, dozens of women across Tehran and other cities repeated her gesture and shared it under the name the Girls of Revolution Street.²³¹

The Challenge of Reporting on a Dispersed Insurgency

For women journalists, in Iran and in exile, the Girls of Revolution Street posed a question of method, and it is the construction of that method, rather than the protest itself, that concerns this study. The episode did not present journalists with a discrete event to report, a demonstration with a location, a duration, and identifiable organisers. It presented them with something far harder to cover: a series of dispersed, anonymous, repeated acts, performed by individuals who did not coordinate, did not issue statements, and were frequently identifiable only by an image. Reporting on such a phenomenon required practices that the field had to improvise. It required the qualification of the acts, the judgement of whether these were connected events or coincidences, a movement or an aggregation; the identification of participants who were often unnamed; and the

²²⁸ "The 'Girls of Revolution Street' Protest against Iran's Compulsory Hijab Laws", *The Wire*, 1 February 2018; "Iran's Hijab Protests: The Girls on Revolution Street," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 13 February 2018.

²²⁹ "First 'Revolution Street Girl' Who Removed Hijab in Protest Sentenced to Jail," *Radio Farda*, 14 April 2019.

²³⁰ "Iran's Hijab Protests: The Girls on Revolution Street," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*.

²³¹ "The Girls of Revolution Street: Feminist Discourse on Iranian Social Media," *Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, 15 February 2018.

contextualisation of gestures that carried their meaning almost entirely in the visual register. It is telling that one of the basic acts of identification, establishing Movahed's name, her age, and the circumstances of her arrest, was performed not by a newsroom but by the human-rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, a detail that illustrates how thoroughly the work of verification had been redistributed beyond professional journalism.²³²

From Martyrdom to Agency: A Transformation Within the Visual Regime

The repression that followed confirmed the seriousness with which the state regarded the episode. Movahed was later sentenced to a year in prison, and dozens of the women who had repeated her gesture faced arrest.²³³ But the deeper significance of the Girls of Revolution Street, for a study of women and the Iranian media, is what the episode reveals about the production of journalistic narratives centred on the female body. The previous section traced the emergence of a visual regime in which the body of a woman, killed in a public square, became the medium for documenting repression. The Girls of Revolution Street mark a transformation within that regime. The body at the centre of the image is no longer the lifeless body of Neda but the standing, deliberate, self-displaying body of a woman performing a calculated act of defiance. The image has shifted from persecution to agency, from the accidental document of a death to the intentional document of a refusal. The journalistic challenge shifted accordingly, from authenticating footage of an event that no one had planned, to interpreting a gesture composed precisely in order to be photographed. The Girls of Revolution Street were, in this sense, both an echo of 2009 and a prefiguration of 2022, a rehearsal of the iconography, and of the coverage method, that the uprising around Mahsa Jina Amini would demand at a far greater scale.

On the Eve of 2022: An Established Female Media Ecosystem

The Components of the Ecosystem

By 2021, the three modalities traced across this chapter had settled into a recognisable ecosystem, and it is worth stating its components precisely, because the temptation to read them as a runway toward 2022 must be resisted. There existed, first, a fragile but still-operating legal feminist press: *Zanan-e Emrooz* was published, quarterly and irregular, financially strained, but not extinguished, and Sherkat continued to use its cover pages and its associated social-media accounts to engage with the questions the regime least wished to see raised. There existed, second, an institutionalised digital and hybrid platform: My Stealthy Freedom, no longer an improvisation but an established operation with a transnational division of labour and a following in the millions. There existed, third, a consolidated body of female signatures in the diaspora, now embedded in Persian-language journalism abroad, experienced, and connected to sources inside the country. A fourth, quieter site of consolidation, lay inside the reformist daily press itself. Across the decade, a generation of women reporters built their careers in the newsrooms of papers such as *Etemad*, *Shargh* (شرق), and *Ham-Mihan* (هم‌میهن). They covered the subjects this chapter has identified as the gendered red lines: family law, violence against women, and the conduct of the morality police. Their stories were not announced in the same manner as those of *Zanan-e Emrooz*, nor did they have a transnational reach as *My Stealthy Freedom*. They accumulated quietly and within the constraints of the domestic press.

The trajectory of Niloofar Hamedī illustrates this fourth modality. She worked first as a reporter for the reformist daily *Etemad*, then moved to *Shargh* in 2020, where she specialised in women's rights and, as Reporters Without Borders notes, was known for tackling subjects that few

²³² Sotoudeh's role in establishing the facts about Movahed: "Iranian Protests against Compulsory Hijab", reporting compiled in February 2018.

²³³ "First 'Revolution Street Girl' Who Removed Hijab in Protest Sentenced to Jail", *Radio Farda*.

journalists dared to cover.²³⁴ In June 2022, three months before the death of Mahsa Amini, she reported for *Shargh* on a case that strikingly prefigured it. The morality police had shot and wounded a man in a Tehran park after arresting his wife for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly. Hamedei contacted the couple, persuaded them to speak, and made public a reality the authorities had tried to suppress.²³⁵ The method she would use to break the story of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 was the practice she had refined across the preceding decade in the daily press.

This is the sense in which the chapter's argument bears on its own conclusion. The female media ecosystem of 2021 was not a single institution but a set of capacities distributed across four sites: the licensed feminist magazine, the exile platform, the diaspora newsroom, and the domestic reformist daily. Each had developed, under its own constraints, a method for making women's lives and women's deaths visible to a public. When Amini's death in "morality police" custody became the immediate catalyst for a nationwide uprising, it was two women working in that fourth site, Niloofar Hamedei of *Shargh* and Elaheh Mohammadi of *Ham-Mihan*, who first carried the story to the world. They would pay for it with the longest sentences the penal code allowed.²³⁶ The chapter that follows turns to that moment, and to the women who reported it.

Imprisoned Women as Producers of Narrative

Another component deserves separate emphasis. Across the decade, imprisoned women became producers of narrative. Figures such as Narges Mohammadi and Nasrin Sotoudeh did not cease to communicate when they were imprisoned; they generated letters, testimonies, and communiqués from inside the prison system, and these texts circulated, were published, and functioned as a form of reportage. Narges Mohammadi's case is the clearest illustration. From within detention, she conducted and assembled interviews with fellow women prisoners that would be published as *White Torture*, a documentary account of the treatment of women in Iranian prisons built entirely from testimony gathered behind the walls.²³⁷ This is what the chapter calls journalism by other means: the production of documented, public, and consequential accounts of repression by women to whom every conventional instrument of journalism, the press card, the byline, the newsroom, and liberty itself, had been denied. The imprisoned writer joined the licensed editor, the exiled curator, and the diasporic correspondent as a recognised position within the ecosystem.

The Visual Genealogy from Neda to Vida Movahed

Running through all four components was a visual genealogy that the decade had assembled almost without intending to. The still of Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009 and the photograph of Vida Movahed standing on the utility box in 2017 were not isolated images. They were the two principal entries in an iconographic repertoire, a stock of recognisable visual forms associating the female body with political defiance and with state violence, and that repertoire was available, legible, and ready when the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 required a movement to find its images quickly. The repertoire was real, and it was a resource.

The legal feminist press, the hybrid platform, the connected diaspora, and the imprisoned narrators were the landscape preceding the 2022 uprising. However, it cannot be claimed that it

²³⁴ "Niloofar Hamedei — the Imprisoned Journalist Who Covered the Death of Mahsa Amini in Iran", *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)*, 7 September 2023.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ "Iran: Restrictions on Detained Women Journalists Following a Protest in Prison", *International Federation of Journalists*, 9 January 2024; Committee to Protect Journalists. "Niloofar Hamedei", *CPJ database*.

²³⁷ Mohammadi, N. (2022). *White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners*, trans. Amir Rezanezhad, London: Oneworld Publications.

made it inevitable. A careful reading of the scholarship on Woman, Life, Freedom will demonstrate this exact point.

Nayereh Tohidi situates the 2022 uprising within a long transformative process rather than treating it as a sudden rupture, and Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi likewise reads it as the product of accumulated grievance and organisation rather than of a single spark.²³⁸ Both accounts insist that the uprising drew on deep roots while being triggered by a contingent event and shaped by conditions that no accumulation of media resources could have predetermined.

The decade between the two waves was not an antechamber in which a foregone conclusion waited to be announced. It was a period in which women working in and around the Iranian media built, under sustained constraint, a set of capacities, editorial, technical, transnational, testimonial, and iconographic, that would be available for use in 2022 but that did not, in themselves, dictate that 2022 would occur, or that it would take the form it did. They tested the limits of the regime in a changing world. They tested the limits of the regime, and a new generation, born entirely under the Islamic Republic, was preparing to make itself heard.

²³⁸ Tohidi, N. (2023). "Iran in a Transformative Process by Woman, Life, Freedom", *Freedom of Thought Journal*, 13; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, E. (2023). "Iran's Uprisings for 'Women, Life, Freedom'", *Politics*, 43(3).

V. 2022 as a Moment of Media and Political Rupture

Concepts: *Media rupture; Camera-witnessing; Citizen documentation; Open-source intelligence; The collapse of the red lines; The espionage charge; Carceral journalism; Jin, Jiyan, Azâdî; The female body as evidence; Transnational relay; Fearless journalism*

Introduction

On the morning of 16 September 2022, Niloofar Hamedî, a reporter for the reformist daily *Shargh*, walked into Kasra Hospital in Tehran and photographed Mahsa Jina Amini's father and grandmother as they held one another in an empty corridor. She posted the image to her Twitter account.²³⁹ Mahsa Jina Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, had been detained three days earlier by the morality police for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly, and she died that day. The post provided, for much of the public, one of the first journalistic confirmations of Amini's death. Within hours, the image became one of those around which public outrage coalesced.

This chapter argues that 2022 was the moment the negotiated red lines traced across the previous chapters finally broke, and that it was two women journalists who broke them. The decade between the Green Movement and the death of Mahsa Jina Amini had produced, as the previous chapter argued, an established female media ecosystem: a licensed feminist press, an exile platform, a diaspora newsroom, and a generation of women reporters inside the domestic dailies. The autumn of 2022 activated all of it at once. The iconographic template set by the still image of Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009 was reactivated around the hospital photograph of Mahsa Jina Amini, and the transnational division of labour that My Stealthy Freedom had institutionalised, gathering documents inside Iran and then editorialising and amplifying them from the diaspora, became the basic architecture of the coverage.

It is also the chapter in which the cost of this form of fearless journalism becomes fully visible. Niloofar Hamedî was arrested on 22 September 2022.²⁴⁰ Elaheh Mohammadi, a reporter for *Ham-Mihan* who had driven through the night to cover Mahsa Jina Amini's funeral in Saqqez, was arrested on 29 September 2022.²⁴¹ The two women spent sixteen months in detention, were tried behind closed doors, sentenced to thirteen and twelve years respectively, and became, in the language of the prizes awarded to them in absentia, the emblematic women journalists of the movement.²⁴² This chapter follows them, and the cohort around them, from the first hour through the trials, the prison cells, and the conditional freedom that came after.

It proceeds in five movements: the death and the media break; the collapse of the red lines; the centrality of women journalists in the documentation; the global circulation of the image; and the feminist political language the movement produced. The thread running through all five is a single claim. The female body, which the visual regime of the previous decade had already made the privileged medium for documenting repression, became in 2022 at once the object of the reporting and the instrument of the protest.

²³⁹ "Niloofar Hamedî: The Imprisoned Journalist Who Covered the Death of Mahsa Amini in Iran", Reporters *Without Borders (RSF)*, 7 September 2023; Hamedî, N. (2022). [Post of the photograph of Amini's father and grandmother], *X (formerly Twitter)*, 16 September 2022.

²⁴⁰ "Niloofar Hamedî", *RSF*. Accounts of the precise date of Hamedî's arrest vary between 20 and 22 September 2022; the date given here follows her lawyer's public statement and RSF's reporting.

²⁴¹ "Elaheh Mohammadi", *USCIRF ForB Victims Database*; Jamalpour, F. and Tabrizy, N. (2025). *For the Sun After Long Nights: The Story of Iran's Women-Led Uprising*, New York: Pantheon Books, 3.

²⁴² "The Journalists Imprisoned for Reporting the Death That Shook Iran", *BBC News*, 6 May 2023.

The Death of Mahsa Jina Amini and the Media Break

A Hospital Photograph and a Funeral

Niloofer Hamedei was at home on the morning of 16 September 2022 when a colleague at *Shargh* telephoned her: sources at Kasra Hospital had seen a young woman in the emergency department.²⁴³ Mahsa Jina Amini's name had already been circulating online for several hours, in whispered conversations and discreet messages reporting that the morality police had beaten her on 13 September for an improper hijab.²⁴⁴ Hamedei went to the hospital, photographed the grieving family, and posted the image, captioning it with the line that the black dress of mourning had become the nation's flag.²⁴⁵ With that post she became one of the first journalists to confirm the death. She had specialised for years in women's rights and in the conduct of the morality police, and had earlier broken the case of the imprisoned writer Sepideh Rashnu; a colleague at *Shargh* later said that without her courage the story would not have reached the public so quickly.²⁴⁶

That same night, Elaheh Mohammadi drove eight hours through winding mountain roads to Saqqez, Mahsa Jina Amini's hometown in Kurdistan. She arrived at half past six in the morning and went directly to the cemetery, unwilling to miss any part of the funeral.²⁴⁷ At the burial, mourners chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azâdi," Woman, Life, Freedom; women removed their headscarves and cut their hair; and the photograph of Amini's lifeless body on a hospital bed spread under the hashtags #Mahsa_Amini and #Jina_Amini.²⁴⁸ That photograph showed Mahsa lying in a coma, her face bruised and swollen and a breathing tube running down her throat, with blood and discoloration visible around one ear. Much of its force lay in the contradictions with the official version: the authorities had insisted that she had simply collapsed in custody from a pre-existing condition, and the sight of a battered, intubated young woman made that account impossible to sustain. It was this image, as much as any words, that turned a death in custody into a national accusation.²⁴⁹ Mohammadi's own report described how hundreds of mourners cried out the slogan, and the protest that began at the graveside spread within days across the country.²⁵⁰ Watching from New York, the journalist Nilo Tabrizy would write that of all the images she saw, the one that affected her most was Hamedei's photograph of Mahsa's father, his face buried in his mother's shoulder, his weight resting on her as though he would fall if he stood alone.²⁵¹

²⁴³ "Niloofer Hamedei", RSF.

²⁴⁴ "Mahsa Amini: An Iranian Journalist Broke the News of the Death. Now She's in Jail", *Middle East Eye*, 30 September 2022.

²⁴⁵ "Iran Frees Niloufar Hamedei and Elaheh Mohammadi, Jailed for Covering Mahsa Amini Death", *BBC News*, 14 January 2024.

²⁴⁶ "Mahsa Amini: An Iranian Journalist Broke the News", *Middle East Eye*, on Hamedei's earlier reporting on the Sepideh Rashnu case, see: "Niloofer Hamedei", RSF.

²⁴⁷ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 3.

²⁴⁸ Assa, S. (2023). "Unveiling a Feminist Strike: The Case of 'Woman, Life, Freedom' in Iran", *Atlantis*, 44(2), 53.

²⁴⁹ "The Story so Far: What Happened to Mahsa Amini at the Detention Center", *IranWire*, 16 September 2022; "Iranian Coroner Claims Mahsa Amini Did Not Die of Blows to Body", *Iran International*, 7 October 2022. Iranian officials initially attributed her collapse to a pre-existing condition; doctors who examined the image, and Amini's family, rejected that account.

²⁵⁰ "The Fearless Reporting of Elaheh Mohammadi", *CNS Maryland*, 15 February 2024; "Iran Frees Niloufar Hamedei and Elaheh Mohammadi", *BBC News*, 14 January 2024.

²⁵¹ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 30.

The Reports They Decided to Publish

Both women were already known for work that tested the perimeter of the permissible. What changed in September 2022 was not the subject matter but the decision to publish despite the line they knew they were crossing. The metaphor this study has used to characterise the whole of the previous decade recurs, almost word for word, in the testimony of the journalist Fatemeh Jamalpour, who had reported for *Shargh* and BBC Persian before being forced into exile:

*"In the Islamic Republic of Iran, journalism is like tightrope walking. In the view of the state, I've committed infraction after infraction. I worked for the Los Angeles Times without official media credentials, wrote tweets critical of the regime, studied in the United States, and was a journalist for BBC Persian. Above all, I am a feminist, and the regime hates us."*²⁵²

Jamalpour knew the arithmetic exactly: when she asked her lawyer what would happen if she were arrested at a protest, he told her she would be given fifteen years.²⁵³ The negotiated management of timing and exposure that had defined the women's press of the Rouhani years gave way in 2022 to a bold decision to publish now and accept the cost.

The Speed of the Image

The hospital photograph bypassed every gatekeeper, as Neda's video had thirteen years earlier, and it travelled faster. Telegram channels posted immediate updates and footage that built on itself by the hour; among the most striking were the videos, later verified by the BBC, of schoolgirls across the country pulling their headscarves from their heads, defacing portraits of the Supreme Leader, and chasing officials from their schoolyards.²⁵⁴ In Shiraz, schoolgirls blocked a main road while waving their headscarves and shouting against the dictator; in Karaj, a group filmed singing Shervin Hajipour's protest song "Barâye" became one of the defining clips of the autumn.²⁵⁵ The state's centralised filtering system, which had blocked YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter since 2009, could not seal the margins quickly enough. Social media, as Naderi observes, gave activists, minorities, and marginalised Iranians a platform beyond the mass media that censorship controlled at home and bias distorted abroad.²⁵⁶ The caution this study has maintained since the "Twitter Revolution" framing of 2009 still holds: the technology was not the cause, and the decisive action remained on the streets and the rooftops. The image set the agenda for the days that followed; it was the sustained presence of bodies in the squares that kept the movement alive.

The Collapse of the Negotiated Red Lines

The Oldest Red Line

As the previous chapters have shown, compulsory veiling was the oldest of the gendered red lines, the one that even *Zanan*, in its boldest years, and even an outspoken cleric such as Sa'idzadeh, had been careful to avoid. In 2022 it moved to the centre of the story. The compulsory hijab, Rouhi writes, had become the symbol of a gratuitous state oppression bearing down most directly on Iran's women, and for the first time the protests against it drew broad support across rich and poor, urban and rural, young and old, with a solidarity among ethnic communities that was

²⁵² Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 10.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ "Iran Schoolgirls 'Remove Hijabs' in Protests against Government", *BBC News*, 4 October 2022; "The Latest Challenge to Iran's Government: Schoolgirls Joining the Protests", *NBC News*, 6 October 2022.

²⁵⁵ "The Latest Challenge to Iran's Government: Schoolgirls Joining the Protests", *NBC News*.

²⁵⁶ Naderi, S. (2025). "The Banality of a Medium: Iran's 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement in the Social Media Mirror", *Atlantis* 46 (1), 15.

without precedent.²⁵⁷ To use the Persian expression Rouhi quotes, *the knife had reached the bone*: a woman could be arrested, humiliated, and killed over the way she wore a headscarf.

New Narratives: State Violence, the Body, Collective Resistance

The journalism that emerged in the weeks after Mahsa's death produced the narratives the red lines had long forbidden: death in custody, the right to one's own body, and collective resistance to the gender regime. Civil resistance reached an intensity, as Sadeghi-Boroujerdi argues, not seen since the first year of the revolution, and resisting the gender regime became inseparable from resisting the Islamic Republic in its totality.²⁵⁸ That the protest was a women's movement is demonstrable: by one data-driven count, between 16 September and 11 November at least 1,158 of 1,265 protests were led by women and girls.²⁵⁹ It was, as Naderi notes, the first national resistance movement initiated by women in the history of the Islamic Republic, and it was led in good part by a generation born entirely under that republic.²⁶⁰

The youngest of those who carried it were schoolchildren. Two sixteen-year-olds, Nika Shakarami and Sarina Esmailzadeh, became, in the words of a New York Times investigation, the new faces of the protests after they were killed in the opening weeks of the uprising – Shakarami in Tehran, Esmailzadeh in Karaj. Their families and human-rights organisations, among them Amnesty International, hold the security forces responsible: Shakarami's skull was crushed and Esmailzadeh was struck repeatedly with batons, and the bodies of both were returned to their families bruised and disfigured. The authorities countered that each girl had taken her own life by jumping from a rooftop, an account their relatives say was extracted under coercion and broadcast on state television. That the state felt compelled to manufacture suicides for two teenagers was itself a measure of how far a generation of girls had moved to the front of the movement, and of how its fearlessness now extended beyond the women journalists who reported on it to the children who filled the streets.²⁶¹

Fatemeh Jamalpour captured the generational shift in a single exchange with an interrogator on her way out of a session: asked what divided her generation from Generation Z, she answered that her own generation had defended, while the younger one attacked.²⁶² Fear and caution, as Rouhi puts it, had turned to resentment and to a sense that there was nothing left to lose.²⁶³ What set 2022 apart, however, was not only its feminist core but its breadth. Students and shopkeepers, oil workers and the urban middle class, Persians, Kurds, Baluch, and Azeris were drawn into a single mobilisation whose demand was no longer the reform of the Islamic Republic but its end. A women-and-girl-led movement that openly called for regime change, and that gathered Iranians of every class, region, and ethnicity behind that call, had no precedent in the four decades since the revolution.²⁶⁴

The State's Answer: The Shutdown and the Espionage Charge

²⁵⁷ Rouhi, M. (2022). "Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran", *Survival*, 64(6), 193.

²⁵⁸ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, E. "Iran's Uprisings for 'Women, Life, Freedom': Over-Determination, Crisis, and the Lineages of Revolt", 414.

²⁵⁹ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings", 405, citing Wintour (2022).

²⁶⁰ Naderi, "The Banality of a Medium", 10.

²⁶¹ "How Two Teenagers Became the New Faces of Iran's Protests", *New York Times*, 13 October 2022. The families of Nika Shakarami and Sarina Esmailzadeh, together with *Amnesty International* and *Iran Human Rights*, hold the security forces responsible for the girls' deaths; the authorities claimed both had died by suicide, an account the families say was coerced and broadcast on state television.

²⁶² Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 14.

²⁶³ Rouhi, "Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran", 194.

²⁶⁴ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings", 414; Rouhi, "Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran", 193.

The state grasped at once, as it had with Neda, that the contest was over the image. It throttled and then shut down internet access to cut Iranians off from one another and from the world, and it answered the protests with killing and mass arrest; the UN Human Rights Council would later record more than three hundred dead and some fourteen thousand arrested within nine weeks.²⁶⁵ Amnesty International obtained leaked official documents ordering the deadly crackdown.²⁶⁶ The authorities also moved directly against the two journalists. In late October 2022, the Ministry of Intelligence and the Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards issued a joint statement accusing Hamed and Mohammadi of being trained agents of foreign intelligence services, engaged in a "hybrid war" against the nation; formal charges of collaboration with a hostile state, assembly and collusion against national security, and propaganda against the regime followed on 8 November, offences that carried sentences of ten to fifteen years or, potentially, death.²⁶⁷ The accusation was the one the state had reached for over Neda's video in 2009. Unable to control the image, the state moved instead against the women who had produced and circulated it.

The Centrality of Women Journalists in the Documentation

Two Pairs of Women

The coverage of 2022 was carried by women working in the two configurations the previous chapters identified. Inside the country, Niloofar Hamed and Elahe Mohammadi of *Shargh* and Elahe Mohammadi of *Ham-Mihan* broke the story. Working across the divide between domestic and diaspora media, a second pair, Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy, the authors of the fullest first-person account of the movement, documented it and later wrote it down. The four women, amongst others, were not strangers to one another. In November 2020, Jamalpour had co-signed a letter with seventeen other women journalists, among them Niloofar Hamed and the twin sisters Elnaz and Elahe Mohammadi, naming a *Shargh* editor as a sexual abuser; the intelligence wing of the Revolutionary Guards summoned all of them for interrogation, and Jamalpour bought a one-way ticket to Istanbul the day she was called.²⁶⁸ The cohort that covered Woman, Life, Freedom was bound together by a prior history of solidarity and of shared exposure to the same apparatus. Elahe's sister Elnaz, social desk editor at *Ham-Mihan*, would herself face repeated judicial pressure in the years that followed.²⁶⁹

Forms of Documentation: Reportage, Photography, Testimony, OSINT

The documentation took several forms: textual reportage, photography, video, direct testimony, and a method new to this study, open-source intelligence. Nilo Tabrizy, working first at the *New York Times* and then on the *Washington Post's* Visual Forensics team, spent the autumn downloading, archiving, sorting, and verifying the videos and images Iranians managed to get out, treating each as precious because she knew the risk taken to record it.²⁷⁰ She described the work as a vocation: to fix moments in time before they became history, and before they could be

²⁶⁵ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 7; "Iran Protests: UN Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate Crackdown", *BBC News*, 24 November 2022; Reporting the figures cited by the UN human rights chief at the opening of the Geneva session.

²⁶⁶ "Iran: Leaked Official Documents Ordering Deadly Crackdown", *Amnesty International*, 2022.

²⁶⁷ "Iran Journalists Sentenced to Prison for Mahsa Amini Protests-Related Cases", *Al Jazeera*, 22 October 2023; "Elahe Mohammadi", *USCIRF*; On the formal charges of 8 November, see: "Iran Begins Trial for Journalist Who Reported Mahsa Amini's Death", *AFP / Deccan Herald*, 29 May 2023; Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 34.

²⁶⁸ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 31–32.

²⁶⁹ "Jailed after Mahsa Amini Coverage, Iranian Sisters Win Global Journalism Award", *IranWire*, 2025.

²⁷⁰ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 45–46.

forgotten.²⁷¹ The method proved decisive precisely where no reporter could go. The massacre at Zahedan on 30 September 2022, the day Iranians came to call "Bloody Friday," was reconstructed almost entirely from visual evidence. Human Rights Watch verified fifty-two videos and photographs shared by the Baluch outlet Haalvsh and interviewed thirteen witnesses and bereaved families, establishing that security forces had fired on worshippers from the rooftops around the Grand Mosalla; the United Nations fact-finding mission later put the toll of that single day at one hundred and four.²⁷² The killing was possible on that scale, one eyewitness told Tabrizy, because the region has no independent media, and its marginalisation keeps the deaths off the international record.²⁷³ What the OSINT method supplied, in other words, was a way of witnessing where witnessing had been made impossible.

The In-Iran and In-exile Division of Labour

Under the crackdown, the division of labour that My Stealthy Freedom had institutionalised became a survival architecture. With the international correspondents of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* expelled, and the domestic press jailed, the reporting depended on Iranians inside the country sending material to colleagues outside it. Jamalpour, reporting from Tehran under a pseudonym, and Tabrizy, verifying from New York, devised a protocol: two messages a day, one when Jamalpour left for a protest and one when she returned, because those messages were the only confirmation Tabrizy had of her safety.²⁷⁴ They communicated in voice notes rather than calls, because the government was jamming the internet, and recorded audio cut out less often and left people inside time to answer when the connection allowed.²⁷⁵

Risk and the Ethics of Real Time

Knowing that arrest could come at any moment, the women took precautions, living in a constant state of vigilance. Journalists kept a glass of water beside the bed so a phone could be destroyed if security forces came in the night; they dropped phones into a pot in the bathroom with music playing beside it; they set their chats to disappear after fifteen minutes.²⁷⁶ When an actress and a documentary filmmaker published photographs of themselves unveiled, they timed the posts to appear together, then switched off their phones and went into hiding for two weeks, so that the images would circulate widely before the women could be seized and forced to delete them.²⁷⁷ Jamalpour's first dispatch of the movement appeared under a false name, its title built, with grim accuracy, around the prospect of her own imprisonment: by the time the reader saw it, she might already be in jail.²⁷⁸ The choices that had once been weighed at the editorial desk were now made on the street, in the moment before a photograph.

Global Circulation and Transnational Visibility

The Relay and Its Prizes

The image moved outward through two channels: the diaspora, which amplified it, and the

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷² "Iran: 'Bloody Friday' Crackdown This Year's Deadliest", *Human Rights Watch*, 22 December 2022; "Report to the Human Rights Council", *OHCHR Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran*, March 2024; See also: "Bloody Friday in Zahedan", *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, 24 October 2022.

²⁷³ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 54.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

international institutions. Its reach, moreover, extended well beyond Iranians abroad. On a single day, 1 October 2022, solidarity rallies were held in some 159 cities across the world, while public figures with no connection to Iran also took up the movement's gestures. Among them, the French actors Juliette Binoche and Marion Cotillard and a member of the European Parliament who cut her hair on the floor of the chamber in Strasbourg took up the movement's gestures. No domestic Iranian event of the post-revolutionary era had commanded that kind of global attention.²⁷⁹ In May 2023, while they were still imprisoned, Hamed and Mohammadi were named laureates of the UNESCO/ Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, together with Narges Mohammadi, in a ceremony held in their absence in New York.²⁸⁰ The two were also joint recipients of the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression International Press Freedom Award and of Harvard's Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism, were awarded the WAN-IFRA Golden Pen of Freedom, and were named among *Time's* hundred most influential people of the year.²⁸¹ Hamed's hospital photograph was itself voted photograph of the year by a group of Iranian and Afghan photojournalists.²⁸² The recognition was genuine, but it also exposed the women to the risks that visibility brings.

The Politicisation of Visibility

The previous chapters flagged the risks of the visual regime, and 2022 confirmed them. Visibility politicised both the women's deaths and the women's reporting, turning the news into an international cause and exposing it to instrumentalisation, decontextualisation, and recuperation. The same relay that protected the journalists by making them famous also flattened them into symbols. The scholarship on the uprising has been insistent on the point. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi reads Woman, Life, Freedom within Iran's own lineages of revolt and its new alignments among Persian-speaking, Kurdish, and Baluch feminist networks, rather than as a story authored from outside.²⁸³ The international apparatus could at the same time supply a counterweight to the state's account: the UN fact-finding mission established by the Human Rights Council in November 2022 concluded, in March 2024, that the state bore responsibility for Mahsa Amini's unlawful death and that its conduct during the crackdown amounted to crimes against humanity, a finding directly opposed to the coroner's official attribution of her death to pre-existing illness.²⁸⁴

The Trial and the Carceral Afterlife

The trials opened on 29 and 30 May 2023, behind closed doors, before Branch 15 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court and its presiding judge, Abolqasem Salavati, long known for his severity toward dissent; the women's lawyers were barred from speaking at the first hearings.²⁸⁵ The venue carried its own history of women punished for occupying public space. It was the same Revolutionary Court complex on Shariati Street where Sahar Khodayari, the 'Blue Girl,' had been

²⁷⁹ "Global Solidarity Rallies Held as Amini Protests Continue in Iran", *RFE/RL (Radio Farda)*, 1 October 2022.

²⁸⁰ "Three Imprisoned Iranian Women Journalists Awarded 2023 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize", *UNESCO*, 3 May 2023; "Iranian Journalists Who Reported on Mahsa Amini's Death Released from Prison on Bail", *CNN*, 15 January 2024.

²⁸¹ "Niloufar Hamed" and "Elaheh Mohammadi" entries listing the *CJFE*, Louis M. Lyons, WAN-IFRA Golden Pen of Freedom, and *Time* 100 recognitions, 2023.

²⁸² "Niloufar Hamed", award listings (photograph of the year for 1401, selected by a group of Iranian and Afghan photojournalists, March 2023).

²⁸³ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings", 432.

²⁸⁴ "Iran Protests: UN Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate Crackdown", *BBC News*, 24 November 2022; OHCHR Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, "March 2024 Report".

²⁸⁵ "Journalists Elaheh Mohammadi and Niloufar Hamed Sentenced to a Total of Twelve Years in Prison on Appeal", *HRANA*, 12 August 2024; "Iranian Journalist Who Reported Amini's Death Stands Trial", *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2023.

sentenced for trying to enter Azadi Stadium, and where she later died after setting herself alight.²⁸⁶ On 22 October 2023, Hamedī was sentenced to thirteen years and Mohammadi to twelve. Both sentences combined three charges: collaborating with the United States, collusion against national security, and propaganda against the state.²⁸⁷ In her closing statement, titled "In the Name of the Pen," Mohammadi defended not only herself but the profession:

*I am Elaheh Mohammadi. I have been a journalist for fifteen years, and throughout my professional career I have done nothing other than speak for people and take a step toward improving their lives. I have had no connection with any foreign government, and I am proud to stay with the people, to be their voice.*²⁸⁸

Hamedī, asked by her husband during a prison call what she felt when the verdict was read, answered with a single string of words: excitement, regret, hope, failure, longing, sorrow, loneliness, pride.²⁸⁹ In Qarchak prison, which has no windows, she and Mohammadi watched the moon through a single hole in the wall, taking turns through the night; on one call Hamedī read down the line a poem by the Kurdish poet Sherko Bekas, on how the loss of the flower, of love, of bread, and finally of freedom would each kill a season in turn.²⁹⁰

Following their release on bail on 14 January 2024, their lives remained deliberately uncertain. Each received a bond of roughly two hundred thousand dollars and was barred from leaving the country. A crowd of hundreds of people met them at the prison gates, and as they walked out without a hijab, they flashed victory signs. Less than twenty-four hours later, the judiciary opened a new case against them for appearing unveiled in public.²⁹¹ On appeal in August 2024, both were acquitted of collaborating with the United States but their remaining convictions were upheld, of which only the most severe, the five-year term, was enforceable, along with a two-year ban from media and political activity; in October 2024 they were summoned to surrender and serve it.²⁹² The last turn came on 11 February 2025. On the forty-sixth anniversary of the revolution, the Supreme Leader's amnesty list included both women, granted, the judiciary stated, only after each had written to the head of the judiciary expressing remorse for her conduct and pledging not to repeat it.²⁹³ A pardon is not an acquittal. The reported requirement that the women express remorse allowed the state to frame clemency on its own terms. Hamedī and Mohammadi had already been released on bail in January 2024, after nearly sixteen months in detention; the February 2025 pardon was a separate and much later development in their cases.

Feminist Political Language and Media Practice

Jin, Jiyan, Azâdî (ژن، ژيان، ازادی): A Kurdish Genealogy

The slogan was Kurdish before it was Iranian. It rose first at Mahsa Jina's funeral in Saqqez, in Iranian Kurdistan, was chanted the next day in Sanandaj, and spread from there into Tehran

²⁸⁶ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 221.

²⁸⁷ "Iranian Journalists Elaheh Mohammadi, Niloofar Hamedī Granted Leader's Amnesty", *Iran Front Page* (citing Mizan News), 11 February 2025.

²⁸⁸ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 224.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹¹ "Iran Frees Niloufar Hamedī and Elaheh Mohammadi", *BBC News*, 14 January 2024; Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 246.

²⁹² "Journalists Elaheh Mohammadi and Niloofar Hamedī Sentenced to a Total of Twelve Years in Prison on Appeal", *HRANA*, 12 August 2024.

²⁹³ "Iran: Journalists Elaheh Mohammadi, Niloofar Hamedī and Rouhollah Nakhaei Granted Pardons", *International Federation of Journalists*, 13 February 2025.

and across the country in its Persian translation, "Zan, Zendegi, Azâdî."²⁹⁴ Its history reaches back decades into the Kurdish women's movement. The dyad "Jin, Jiyan" entered the discourse of the Kurdistan Workers' Party around 1999, following the publication of a booklet on women and life; the term "Azâdî" was added by approximately 2008; and Kurdish women invoked the formula at commemorations of femicide as early as 2002, with the Turkish authorities banning its use at the 2004 International Women's Day protests in Bitlis.²⁹⁵ Its genealogy mattered, because Amini's death sat at the intersection of two histories of subordination. As Assa argues, Jina's body converged with a long history of both gender and ethnic oppression, the oppression of the Kurdish region predating the Islamic Republic by decades.²⁹⁶ In carrying the slogan outward from Kurdistan into the national and then the global register, the women journalists who reported it transmitted not only a phrase but the layered history of subordination that phrase named.

The Female Body as a Medium

This is the point at which the visual regime traced from 2009 reaches its culmination. The body of Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009 was a lifeless one, recorded by accident; the body of Vida Movahed on the utility box on Enghelab Street in 2017 was a standing, deliberate one, composed in order to be photographed; the body of Mahsa Amini in 2022 was both at once, a death that became an image and an image that brought hundreds of thousands of people protesting into the street.²⁹⁷ Fatemeh Jamalpour names the underlying logic from inside the prison system: a political prisoner has nothing left to lose but her body and her life, and so, in protest, she uses it even at the risk of damaging it, the body becoming the last instrument of protest available to her.²⁹⁸ The women held in Evin, journalists, documentary filmmakers, and human-rights activists, confined alongside Baha'i, Kurdish, Sunni Arab, Baluch, leftist, and pro-Pahlavi prisoners, turned even the cell into a site of documentation and of solidarity, learning one another's histories of suffering and recording them.²⁹⁹

Journalism and the Production of Meaning

The reporting did not merely transmit the movement; it helped to produce its meaning. Nilo Tabrizy wrote that the bond she and Fatemeh Jamalpour sustained across the border, at real risk to the woman inside, was itself a form of resistance, a refusal the state could not prevent.³⁰⁰ The journalism by other means that the previous chapter named, the imprisoned woman who keeps writing, reached its fullest form here: Mohammadi's courtroom statement, Niloofar Hamed's poem read down a prison telephone line, and the report a *Shargh* editor built around the two women's empty desks under the title "Your Absence, Your Empty Places." The women who covered Woman, Life, Freedom reported the movement from within it, and they were among the first to be imprisoned for doing so.

Conclusion

The female media ecosystem built across a century, and consolidated across the decade between the two waves, met in 2022 an event that demanded exactly the capacities it had accumulated. What the period produced was a journalism that can be called fearless, not because those who practised it felt no fear, but because they published in full knowledge of the consequences and then

²⁹⁴ "Iran's Protesters Find Inspiration in a Kurdish Revolutionary Slogan", *NPR*, 27 October 2022; Naderi "The Banality of a Medium", 10.

²⁹⁵ Rostampour, S. "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî: Anti-Colonial Trajectory of a Revolutionary Feminist Slogan", *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*.

²⁹⁶ Assa, "Unveiling a Feminist Strike", 62.

²⁹⁷ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 20.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

bore them.

Tohidi and others have warned against reading 2022 as a sudden rupture or a finished revolution, and they are right: the uprising drew on deep roots and was triggered by a contingent event, and it did not end the thing it rose against.³⁰¹ The Islamic Republic did not fall. The compulsory hijab was not abolished, although it is nowadays blurred. Hamed and Mohammadi were freed, and the pardon was paid for with a letter of remorse. What the photograph and its circulation accomplished, however, proved durable. The women who produced the image, and the women who carried it across the border, widened the range of what could be documented about the conduct of the Iranian state, and that record has not been undone.

The magnitude is worth stating plainly. A single photograph – taken in a hospital corridor and posted by one reporter – became the catalyst for the broadest and most sustained challenge the Islamic Republic had faced: a movement that drew Iranians of every class, region, and ethnicity into the streets behind a demand for an end to the system, that was carried at its front by women and girls, and that resonated in cities on every continent. It shifted, durably, the public's sense of what the state could be made to answer for. That the work of two women journalists – who reported the death and the funeral knowing exactly what it would cost them – played such a consequential role in the movement's emergence and visibility is at the heart of the story this chapter has told.

³⁰¹ Tohidi, N. (2023). "Iran in a Transformative Process by Woman, Life, Freedom", *Freedom of Thought Journal*, 13; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Iran's Uprisings", 414.

VI. Fearless Journalism as a Gendered Mode of Resistance

Concepts: Feminist Epistemology / Journalism as Embodied Knowledge of Resistance

Operative Definition and Conceptualisation of "Fearless Journalism"

Feminist epistemology provides the analytical lens for this chapter. It is this lens through which fearless journalism must first be specified. Feminist media scholars have for long refused to acknowledge the figure of the detached observer, treating the line between professional distance and political commitment as porous rather than fixed. As Van Zoonen argues, what distinguishes feminist perspectives on the media from other approaches is precisely "the reciprocal relation between theory, politics and activism" and "the blurred line between the feminist as academic and the feminist as activist."³⁰² Fearless journalism, as the present thesis understands it, is the reportorial counterpart of that blur: a practice in which the distinction between witnessing a movement and participating in it cannot be cleanly maintained, because the reporter's own body is implicated in the events she records. Reporting, on this account, is a form of embodied knowledge, produced from a situated position and at personal cost.

Revisiting the Working Definition

The working definition introduced by this study held fearless journalism to be a practice of reporting carried out under conditions in which truth-telling is punishable, where the journalist publishes in the knowledge that the story carries a personal cost and accepts that cost as part of the act. Read through the lens of feminist epistemology, that definition acquires a further dimension: the cost is borne not by an abstract professional but by an embodied subject whose position in the world conditions both what she can know and what it will cost her to make it public. The case study of Mahsa's death allows the definition to be refined rather than discarded. What the Woman, Life, Freedom movement made visible was that fearlessness, in this sense, is not the absence of fear but its subordination to a prior commitment. As Fatemeh Jamalpour put it, journalism in the Islamic Republic is a matter of walking a tightrope, and the journalist knows the height of the fall before she steps out.³⁰³ Her own arithmetic was exact: when she asked her lawyer what an arrest at a protest would cost her, the answer was fifteen years.³⁰⁴ Fearless journalism, on this reading, is the decision to step onto the wire in full knowledge of the drop.

Distinguishing Features: Truth-telling, Assumed Risk, Ethical Insistence, and Resistance

Four features distinguish the practice, and they can be defined using theoretical literature. The first is truth-telling under conditions of organised falsehood: the journalist's task is not merely to report but to contradict an official account that the state has the power to enforce. The first is truth-telling under conditions of organised falsehood: the journalist's task is not merely to report but to contradict an official account that the state has the power to enforce. The second is assumed risk, by which the cost is not an accident of the work but a foreseen condition of it; Fatemeh Jamalpour's first dispatch of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, published under a pseudonym and built around the prospect of her own imprisonment, made the risk the very frame of the report.³⁰⁵ The third is ethical insistence, the refusal to let the calculation of danger override the obligation to publish, and it is here that the content of the truth at stake becomes legible. What the fearless journalist insists upon recording is, in Naderi's formulation, "the silent, persistent

³⁰² Van Zoonen, L. (1991). "Feminist Perspectives on the Media", in Curran, J. and Gurevitch, M. ed. (1991). *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, 34.

³⁰³ Jamalpour, F. and Tabrizi, N. (2025). *For the Sun After Long Nights: The Story of Iran's Women-Led Uprising*, New York: Pantheon Books, 10.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

presence of life without adjectives," the subaltern narratives of ordinary life that the state's discourse works to erase.³⁰⁶ The fourth is resistance to fear understood as a deliberate discipline rather than a temperament. Nasrin Sotoudeh, writing from within the same carceral system, describes the apparatus of repression as a beast that must be confronted, urging that fear be overcome and the beast looked in the eyes.³⁰⁷ That such resistance remains possible even under the most asymmetrical conditions is a premise feminist media theory supplies: as Van Zoonen insists, dominant discourse "can therefore never be completely overpowering, since by definition there will be resistance and struggle."³⁰⁸

Distinguishing Fearless Journalism from Investigative Journalism, Citizen Journalism, and Activism

The practice of fearless journalism borders on three adjacent categories without collapsing into any of them. It shares with investigative journalism the commitment to uncovering what power conceals, but it differs in that the principal obstacle is not the difficulty of discovery but the certainty of reprisal. Niloofar Hamedei did not have to investigate Mahsa Amini's death so much as decide to confirm it and circulate the confirmation under her own name. It shares with citizen journalism the reliance on material gathered and transmitted outside the licensed channels, and the coverage of 2022 did depend on citizens inside the country sending documents to professionals abroad. Yet the fearless journalist is a trained professional who stakes a career and a byline rather than an anonymous uploader, and the distinction carries the epistemic weight Naderi makes explicit when she warns that citizen photojournalism "can lead to an overreliance on the dominant discourse," thereby "diminishing the subjective agency and authenticity of the actors and 'witnesses' involved in the moment."³⁰⁹ The professional's signed and verified account is one safeguard against that diminishment. Finally, the practice shares with activism a political stake in the outcome, but it remains bound by the journalistic obligation to verify, the obligation that the open-source verification work described in the previous chapter carried to an exacting standard. Naderi's critique of "hashtag activism" clarifies the difference: such activism, she argues, has "shifted the focus of political engagement away from social justice's liberatory goals," transforming it into a tool for "gaining more digital presence on social media," and it tends to produce a "hyperreal political subject" for whom virtual presence displaces the actual.³¹⁰ Fearless journalism resists that displacement by anchoring the account in a verified and embodied event.

Cutting across all three distinctions is the gendered character of the practice, which feminist media studies brings into view. Van Zoonen observes that women journalists have long occupied a "precarious balance between 'deviance' and adaptation," in which "feminine" values such as compassion are treated as at odds with the directness, distrust, and toughness conventionally expected of the reporter.³¹¹ The two women journalists of 2022 did not so much resolve that tension as overturn its terms, making compassion and proximity to the grieving the very ground of their authority rather than a deviation from professional norms. The photograph taken in a hospital corridor and the dispatch filed from a graveside are examples of this. The qualities previously described as feminine and unprofessional turned into the evidentiary force of the reporting.

³⁰⁶ Naderi, S. (2025). "The Banality of a Medium: Iran's 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement in the Social Media Mirror", *Atlantis*, 46(1).

³⁰⁷ Sotoudeh, N. (2023). *Women, Life, Freedom: Our Fight for Human Rights and Equality in Iran*, trans. Parisa Saranj, foreword by Jeff Kaufman, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

³⁰⁸ Van Zoonen, "Feminist Perspectives on the Media", 34.

³⁰⁹ Naderi, "The Banality of a Medium", 15.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³¹¹ Van Zoonen, "Feminist Perspectives on the Media", 56.

"Fearless Journalism" as a Paradigm Specific to High-Repression Contexts

It follows that fearless journalism is not a universal mode of reporting that any journalist might display but a paradigm that emerges under specific conditions, namely high repression combined with a partial and leaky media ecology. As Naderi observes, social media gave activists and marginalised Iranians a platform beyond the mass media that censorship controlled at home and distortion shaped abroad, and it was in the gap opened by that leakiness that the fearless journalist operated.³¹² Where repression is total, no such journalism can circulate; where it is absent, the category loses its force. The paradigm belongs to the threshold between the two, and the women of 2022 worked precisely on that threshold.

What gives the paradigm its specifically gendered and epistemic character, however, is the place of the female body within it. In the symbolic order of Iranian national politics, as Naderi notes, the woman's body "is idealized and even theologized to the extent that it symbolizes the 'nation' [vatan]," so that a woman's reclaiming of "control over their bodily territory" is at once an intimate and a political act.³¹³ The fearless journalism of 2022 reported from in that same vein, generating knowledge, as women, from the situated position of those whom the regime tries to subordinate. Naderi reads the Woman, Life, Freedom movement as the emergence of an indigenous "standpoint" of feminism, one that "first and foremost seeks emancipation inside the life of real people and not by imposing pre-prepared Orientalist, essentialized androcentric definitions of liberation upon those lives," a standpoint she aligns with Fatemeh Sadeghi's notion of "jiyanism," an indigenous feminism that is at once "feminist and life-affirming."³¹⁴

Understood in these terms, fearless journalism is the reportorial expression of a subaltern standpoint: it dignifies, in Naderi's phrase, "life, stripped of adjectives, at the heart of politics," and in doing so it dismantles the "false oppositions," such as that between national and women's liberation, on which the state's discourse had relied.³¹⁵ The journalist who photographs a young woman's dying body or drives through the night to a Kurdish funeral is not transmitting a movement from the outside. They are producing knowledge from within it, at the cost of their own exposure, and it is this that makes the journalism at once fearless and, in the strict sense, a mode of resistance.

Case Study: Niloofar Hamed

Formation: How a Daughter of the Republic Became a Fearless Journalist

Niloofar Hamed was born on 22 October 1992 in Babol, a town in the northern province of Mazandaran. The date is worth pausing on, because it places her birth in the same year that Shahla Sherkat founded *Zanan*. Hamed belongs, in other words, to the first generation to come of age entirely inside the media world this study has reconstructed, a generation for whom an outspoken feminist press was not an innovation still to be won but a feature of the landscape it inherited. The question this chapter has to answer is how a woman raised wholly under the Islamic Republic, in the very years when that Republic was at its most assured, became one of the journalists who broke its red lines so dramatically. The previous chapters have traced a part of the answer: a feminist public discourse that had already been normalised, a professional infrastructure that had institutionalised the reporting of women's lives, and a generational change that had exhausted the older strategy of caution.

³¹² Naderi, "The Banality of a Medium", 15.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

The first legacy is discursive. By the time Hamedī was a teenager, the work of *Zanan* and its contemporaries had, on Sherkat's own assessment, stripped the word "feminism" of the pejorative charge it had carried in Iran and made the public claiming of women's rights ordinary rather than transgressive, so that women were, in her phrase, no longer afraid to proclaim their rights aloud.³¹⁶ When the magazine was banned in 2008, Hamedī was fifteen or sixteen, yet the closure did not retract the discourse *Zanan* had circulated for sixteen years. It transmitted it, as the conclusion of this study has argued, into the journalism and the digital activism that came after. Hamedī's generation did not have to establish the proposition that a woman's rights belonged on the front page. It received that proposition as a given.

The second legacy is infrastructural. Hamedī entered journalism not through the diaspora platforms but through the domestic, licensed press, moving across the dailies Jam-e Jam, Hamshahri, and Etemad Online, outlets ranging from the state-affiliated to the reformist, before joining the social affairs desk of *Shargh*.³¹⁷ The desk itself is significant. The women's beat that *Zanan* had pioneered as an act of advocacy had, by Hamedī's time, hardened into a recognised journalistic specialism, a fixed place on the masthead from which a reporter could treat women's lives as a matter of course rather than of daring. Her early work bears this out. She reported on women's football, travelling to cover the domestic women's league with what a former national-team coach described as a pen full of affection for the players and free of any taste for controversy,³¹⁸ and she became associated with the campaign for women's right to enter the stadiums from which they were barred, a cause whose human cost the previous chapter registered in the figure of Sahar Khodayari. The beat was not incidental to her later fearlessness; it was its training ground.

The third legacy is generational, a journalist willing to publish across the line. In the months before September 2022, Hamedī had already been filing precisely the kind of story Mahsa Jina Amini's death would become. In the spring of 2022 she broke the account of a morality-police officer who had shot and wounded a man in Tehran's Pardisan Park after detaining his wife over her hijab, contacting the couple repeatedly until they agreed to speak and so making public an episode the authorities had tried to bury.³¹⁹ Her name had also circulated in connection with the case of the writer Sepideh Rashnu, forced into a televised confession after a confrontation over compulsory veiling, whose family and lawyer Hamedī was among the first to reach.³²⁰ These were not the cautious, hedged dispatches of the Rouhani-era women's press the earlier chapters described. They were the work of a reporter who had already concluded, with the generation around her, that the older bargain had run its course. The shift Fatemeh Jamalpour compressed into a single phrase, that her own generation had defended while the younger one attacked, is

³¹⁶ Sherkat, S. in Sherkat, S. and Bromberger, C. (2009). *Zanân: le journal de l'autre Iran*, Paris: CNRS Editions, self-translated.

³¹⁷ On Hamedī's earlier positions at Jam-e Jam, Hamshahri, and Etemad Online before joining Shargh, see the Persian-language encyclopaedic entry on the journalist; the affiliation with Shargh's social-affairs group is confirmed by the paper's own author page and by Reporters Without Borders, "Niloofar Hamedī: The Imprisoned Journalist Who Covered the Death of Mahsa Amini in Iran", 7 September 2023.

³¹⁸ "Sarmorabbi-ye pishin-e tim-e melli-ye futbol-e zanan: Niloofar Hamedī faqat shoghlash ra anjam midad", [Former coach of the women's national football team: Niloofar Hamedī was only doing her job], *Iran International*, 31 October 2022.

³¹⁹ "Niloofar Hamedī", *RSF*, 7 September 2023, which dates the Pardisan Park shooting to June 2022 and notes its resemblance to the Amini case; see also: "Niloofar Hamedī", "Journalism Is Not a Crime", which gives the incident as 28 April 2022, and the Persian-language encyclopaedic entry, which dates her report to Khordad 1401.

³²⁰ "Iranian Journalists Niloofar Hamedī and Elaheh Mohammadi Have Been Awarded WAN-IFRA's 2023 Golden Pen of Freedom", *WAN-IFRA*, 28 June 2023.

legible in Hamedī's byline well before the fall of 2022.³²¹ By the time the call came from Kasra Hospital, the disposition the world would read as exceptional courage was, for her, continuous with the work she had been doing all along.

The Decisive Act and Its Symbolic Meaning

The discourse around the hospital photograph and its consequences were discussed in the previous chapter. The present argument will look at the structure of the act. As she was confronted with material the regime meant to control, Hamedī still decided to fact-check, confirm and publish under her own name and on an account that contradicted the official version.³²² She was quickly charged with espionage, a logic the state had applied many times, including in the case of the video of Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009. As they were unable to control the image and the narrative, the authorities moved against the woman who had published it.

Discursive Analysis: Framing Before and After the Arrest

A discursive reading of Hamedī's output registers a shift in the framing of the arrest. Before September 2022, her work was associated with the reformist press. Investigative but bounded, Hamedī's work framed women's rights and the conduct of the morality police within the limits licensed dailies could withstand. Her post of Amini's grieving family at Kasra Hospital broke this association. For a single image and a charged caption, it addressed a mass audience in real time, and abandoned the hedged framing of the desk for the directness of testimony. After the arrest, when she could no longer publish, the framing passed to others, most pointedly to the *Shargh* editor who built a report on the two women's empty desks under the title "Your Absence, Your Empty Places." The trajectory runs from bounded reporting, through the unhedged image, to a silence that itself became the context. Domestic and international audiences finally recognized Hamedī as the emblematic woman journalist of the movement, a designation that, as the previous chapter argued, both protected and flattened her.

Case Study: Elaheh Mohammadi

Formation: The Education of a Women's-Rights Reporter

Elaheh Mohammadi was born on 9 May 1987 in Tehran. If Hamedī's formation illustrates how a normalised feminist discourse was inherited rather than fought for, Mohammadi's illustrates something more specific still: the way the women's movement traced in this study had, by the 2000s, produced its own institutions, and how those institutions in turn produced a journalist. After taking a bachelor's degree in Persian language and literature at Al-Zahra University in 2009 and a master's degree in women's studies at Shahid Bahonar University in Kerman in 2011, she began reporting on politics and social affairs for a succession of outlets, among them Etemad, Khabar Online (خبرآنلاین), Haft-e Sobh, Shahrvand (شهروند), and Etemad Online, before settling at the social desk of Ham-Mihan.³²³

The detail of the degrees is not incidental. Al-Zahra is Iran's principal women's university, and women's studies as an academic field had taken root in Iranian universities mainly during the reformist years, in the same period and out of the same ferment that this study has located in the women's press and the women's NGOs of the Khatami era. Elaheh Mohammadi's training was therefore downstream of the very movement she would later report: the questions that *Zanan* and other similar newspapers had forced onto the printed page in the 1990s had, by the time she

³²¹ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun After Long Nights*, 14.

³²² "Iran Frees Niloufar Hamedī and Elaheh Mohammadi, Jailed for Covering Mahsa Amini Death", *BBC News*, 14 January 2024.

³²³ "Iran: Journalist Elaheh Mohammadi Held for Past 11 Months for Giving a Voice to Women", *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)*, 6 September 2023.

reached university, become a discipline she could study. The answer to how a woman born under the Islamic Republic became a fearless advocate for women's rights is, in her case, partly institutional. She was formed by an apparatus of education and reform that the preceding generation of women had built, and she carried its preoccupations directly into her journalism. Her reporting bears the imprint. As her colleagues at Reporters Without Borders noted, Mohammadi analysed proposed legislation advertised as protecting women, and wrote on the forced marriage of young girls and on the prohibition that barred women from riding motorcycles. In the summer of 2022, only weeks before Mahsa Jina Amini's death, a report she had published in *Shargh* under the title "Murder under the Codename 'Honour'" was named one of the year's outstanding reports by the Tehran Province Journalists' Association.³²⁴ The continuity with the magazine at the centre of this study is exact. *Zanan* had documented domestic violence, trafficking, and the legal machinery that left women unprotected, and where it had dissected the Family Protection Bill as a regression dressed as reform; Mohammadi a generation later was exposing honour killing and scrutinising legislation marketed as protective.

The Mohammadi Twins: A Shared Vocation and a Relay

Mohammadi's fearlessness cannot be separated from the fact that it was shared within her family. She has a twin sister, Elnaz, also a journalist and the social-affairs editor of *Ham-Mihan*, whose own beat covers women's rights, children's rights, and social harm.³²⁵ Writing has been a family vocation: since childhood the two sisters shared a passion for literature and poetry, and from 2022 they worked together at *Ham-Mihan*, a reformist daily that had itself only recently reopened after some fifteen years of government-imposed closure. The detail returns the case to a theme the earlier chapters established, namely that the female media ecosystem operated as a network rather than a collection of individuals. The solidarity was concrete and documented: in November 2020 Elaheh had been among the eighteen women journalists, alongside her sister and Niloofar Hamedi, who co-signed a letter naming a *Shargh* editor as an abuser and were summoned for interrogation as a result.³²⁶

When Elaheh was arrested, it was Elnaz who published in *Ham-Mihan* two days later.³²⁷ For continuing Elaheh's work, and in particular for covering the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, Elnaz was herself detained in February 2023. She was later given a three-year suspended sentence, yet she went on reporting under surveillance and judicial pressure.³²⁸

The Decisive Act and Its Symbolic Meaning

The journey to Saqqez, the photos Elaheh published and the funeral itself belong to the previous chapter and need not be retold. What bears restating is the meaning carried by the choice. Mohammadi was among the very few journalists to report Mahsa Jina Amini's burial from the ground, and she did so in an article she titled "A Land of Sorrow," describing how the mourners cried out the slogan, how women removed their headscarves, and how the burial became the first

³²⁴ On the report "Qatl ba esm-e ramz-e namus" [Murder under the codename "honour"], published in *Shargh* in Mordad 1401 and named among the year's outstanding reports by the Tehran Province Journalists' Association, see the Persian-language encyclopaedic entry on Mohammadi and Tabnak.

³²⁵ Report of the International Women's Media Foundation award in *Akhbar-e Rooz*, 16 May 2026.

³²⁶ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun After Long Nights*, 31–32.

³²⁷ "Iran: Journalist Elaheh Mohammadi Held for Past 11 Months", *RSF*, 6 September 2023, quoting Elnaz Mohammadi's account in *Ham-Mihan*.

³²⁸ "Elaheh va Elnaz Mohammadi barande-ye jayeze-ye 'Shoja'at dar ruznamenegari' shodand" [Elaheh and Elnaz Mohammadi win the "Courage in Journalism" award], *Akhbar-e Rooz*, 16 May 2026, reporting the International Women's Media Foundation's announcement of 14 May 2026.

protest of the movement.³²⁹ To travel to a Kurdish town to report a Kurdish woman's funeral was to report at the precise intersection of the gendered and the ethnic subordination that Mahsa's death condensed, and it was at that graveside that the movement's Kurdish slogan first rose. The consequence was her arrest on 29 September 2022, and a prosecution that treated the reporting of a funeral as collaboration with a hostile power, which is to say that it treated the act of independent witness as in itself an act against the state.

The Spoken Defence of the Profession and the Register of Plain Witness

If Niloofar Hamedī became the emblem of the image, Elaheh Mohammadi became the emblem of the spoken defence of the profession. Her closing statement, titled "In the Name of the Pen," refused the frame of espionage and reasserted the journalist's vocation, declaring that in fifteen years of work she had done nothing but speak for people and that she was proud to remain among them as their voice.³³⁰ The statement is the ethical core of the case, for it answers the charge not by denying the reporting but by defending it as the whole of what journalism is for. Read alongside Khosrokhavar's account of the uprising as the first genuinely feminist movement in Iran's history, one in which young women formed the vanguard, Mohammadi's insistence on speaking in the name of the pen belongs to the movement's deepest claim, that the right to give an account of oneself is not negotiable.³³¹

Mohammadi's texts, from the funeral dispatch to the courtroom statement, share a register of plain witness. They report what was seen and heard and decline the euphemism that the licensed press had habitually employed. That positioning is what made her a symbol of the movement: the slogan she reported from Saqqez, the funeral she described, and the statement she delivered from the dock were each taken up and recirculated until Mohammadi herself became part of the movement's iconography.

Conclusion

To answer the question with which the chapter began, we can say that Niloofar Hamedī and Elaheh Mohammadi were the product of a century of women's journalism in Iran and of the particular institutions built during that time. They were both born under the Islamic Republic, and both grew up as the women's press was already active in the defense of women's rights. They both entered the profession of journalism through national dailies and remained in Iran rather than joining the diaspora. What looked from the outside like the sudden appearance of fearless journalists was in fact the continuity of a long process that can be traced to *Danish*, *Zanan* and beyond.

This inheritance bore on the two women in different ways; and the difference is instructive. Hamedī worked in service of the image: a single photograph posted under her own name that confirmed what the state wished to conceal. Mohammadi worked in service of the word, first in the dispatch she filed from a Kurdish graveside and then in the statement she delivered from the dock, speaking, as she put it, in the name of the pen. Where Hamedī's formation was that of the newsroom, Mohammadi's passed additionally through the university, through a degree in the very women's studies that the reformist era had established, so that she brought into Ham-Mihan the academic form of the questions *Zanan* had once raised in the marketplace. The first helped give the movement its defining visual register; the second gave its journalism a language of self-defence.

Lastly, the network they shared was central to their work. The chapter has shown the solidarity

³²⁹ "Yek vatan anduh" [A Land of Sorrow], published in *Ham-Mihan*, see: "Elaheh Mohammadi kist?" [Who is Elaheh Mohammadi?], *Rouydad*24, 16 January 2024.

³³⁰ Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun*, 224.

³³¹ Khosrokhavar, F. (2024). *Revolt Against Theocracy: The Mahsa Movement and the Feminist Uprising in Iran*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

that bound them and a larger group of women journalists working at the time. It was not solely the sum of individual acts of bravery but the work of an ecosystem.

Both women paid a high cost. They lost their freedom for nearly sixteen months and faced a secret trial. Their release on bail in January 2024 did not amount to vindication, and their cases continued until they were pardoned in February 2025, on terms that the regime itself dictated.

VII. Continuities, Ruptures and Reinterpretations over Four Decades

The previous chapters proceeded case by case and decade by decade. This chapter steps back from the chronology to read the whole sequence at once. Its purpose is analytical rather than narrative. It draws the lines that run from the licensed feminist press of the 1990s through the blogosphere of the 2000s to the fearless journalism of the 2020s. The argument the chapter defends is that the four decades form one trajectory, that the trajectory is held together by an ethical insistence **rather than by any single institution**, and that 2022 was the moment at which that insistence crystallised.

The Feminist Continuity Line from *Zanan* to Post-2022

Persistence of Ethical Insistence: From Feminism From Within to Fearless Journalism

The thread that runs through the entire period **is not a publication, a platform, or a generation**. It is a commitment to the proposition that women's lives belong on the public record, and that recording them is legitimate work even when the state declares it illegitimate. This study has called the early form of that commitment *editorial negotiation* and its late form *fearless journalism*, and the two look very different on the page. Yet they share a single premise, which is that the documentation of women's existence under the Islamic Republic is a public good worth a private cost.

The premise has a recognisable intellectual lineage. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini argued in her study of the gender debates of the 1990s, the most consequential challenge to the Islamic Republic's gender order came from within its religious idiom, from women who pressed the claim that justice and equality were themselves Islamic demands.³³² *Zanan* was one of the main journalistic instruments of that argument. It made the case for women's rights in the language of the system it was addressing, and in doing so it normalised a vocabulary that had been treated as foreign. Shahla Sherkat's own assessment, offered years later, was that this work had stripped the word feminism of its pejorative charge and made the public claiming of women's rights ordinary rather than transgressive.³³³ The ethical insistence, in this first form, was patient, indirect, and lawful. It worked the margins of the printable.

The women reporters who walked into Kasra Hospital and drove through the night to Saqqez were crossing deliberately the perimeters of what could be printed and accepting the consequences. The continuity therefore lies in the conviction. What Mir-Hosseini described as feminism from within and what the present study has called fearless journalism are two settings of the same ethical instrument, the first calibrated for survival inside the system, the second for testimony against it.

Shahla Sherkat and *Zanan*'s Legacy in Post-2022 Practices

The clearest evidence that this is a single line, and not two unrelated episodes that happen to concern women, is biographical. Niloofar Hamedī was born in 1992, the year Sherkat founded *Zanan*. She belongs to the first cohort to have come of age entirely inside the media world this study has reconstructed, a cohort for whom an outspoken feminist press was not an achievement still to be won but a feature of the landscape it inherited. When *Zanan* was banned in 2008, that generation was already adolescent. The closure did not erase the message the magazine had carried for sixteen years. The message survived into the journalism of a younger generation defending women's rights.

³³² Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1999). *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³³³ Sherkat, S. (2009). "Telling the Stories of Iranian Women's Lives", *Nieman Reports*.

The legacy is also institutional, and it is visible in the beat itself. The women's and social-affairs desk that Niloofar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammadi occupied in the reformist dailies was the professional descendant of the territory *Zanan* and similar publications had marked out: family law, violence against women, the body, and the unequal terms of public life. Sherkat had described the practice of editing her magazine as a form of tightrope walking, an attempt to walk a fine line that respects state regulations while still reaching an endpoint, conducted with almost no protection.³³⁴ The image survived the magazine. The reporters of 2022 walked the same line with the same absence of protection, and the difference is that they stopped pretending the line could hold.

Continuity of Solidarity Networks Between Women Journalists

The network is a key element that kept functioning across the decades. The licensed press, the exile platforms, the diaspora newsrooms, and the domestic social desks were constantly in relation to one another. They shared contributors, sources, and a sense of common cause. The transnational relay that *My Stealthy Freedom* institutionalised, by gathering material inside Iran and editorialising and amplifying it from abroad, was the most public expression of a solidarity that had always operated more quietly through personal ties.

The literature on women's magazines in the Islamic Republic has described this ecology as a durable infrastructure. As Mona Tajali notes in her survey of women's political participation and the women's press, these publications functioned as connective tissue, sustaining a constituency and a set of relationships that outlived any individual licence.³³⁵ The point matters for the synthesis, because it explains how a discourse could persist through repeated closures. The regime could ban a magazine but it could not ban the network among the women who had made it.

Transformation of Forms: From Print Magazine to Digital Network

The continuity of conviction and of networks coexisted with a near-total transformation of form. The feminist insistence began as monthly printed magazines sold at newsstands and ended nowadays as a distributed digital network with no fixed address. This is the apparent paradox the chapter has to resolve, and the resolution is straightforward once form is distinguished from function. The function, the public documentation of women's lives, remained constant. The form migrated to whatever medium remained available after the previous one was foreclosed.

Each new form of media was adopted under constraint, as the prior form was being shut down, and each carried its own vulnerabilities. The print magazine could be suspended by a court. The digital network could be filtered, throttled, and surveilled. What did not change was the underlying project, and it is the constancy beneath the succession of forms that justifies treating the four decades as a single trajectory rather than as a set of discontinuous moments that share only a subject.

³³⁴ Sherkat, S., Shahrokni, N. and Hasso, F. (2015). "Zanan-e Emrooz", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 11(3), 379–83.

³³⁵ Tajali, M. (2023). "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Technological Transformations and their Political Consequences

From the Print Press to the Blog, From the blog to Social Networks: The Logic of Adaptation

The history this study has told is, on one reading, a history of media migration. Women's journalism moved from the licensed monthly to the weblog and from the weblog to the social platform, and at each step it did so because the previous medium had been narrowed to the point of unusability. Gholam Khiabany's account of the Iranian blogosphere captured the first of these shifts, describing a Persian-language *Blogistan* that became, for a period in the 2000s, a comparatively open space for the kind of writing that print could no longer safely carry.³³⁶

The same logic governed the next shift. As Niki Akhavan argued in her study of Iranian online culture, the internet in Iran was never simply a tool of liberation or a tool of control but a contested terrain on which both were continuously at work.³³⁷ When blogging itself came under pressure, the social platforms inherited the function, and by 2022 Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp had become the principal channels through which women's reporting reached the public. The medium changed three times in three decades. The logic of adaptation, the move to the next available surface as the current one closed, did not change at all.

The Technological Transition and the New Perimeter of Repression

Every transition opened a new space. The blog widened the field of expression and was met with the early surveillance infrastructure. The social platforms were met with bandwidth throttling, periodic shutdowns, and the deep-packet inspection. As Mahsa Alimardani and Stefania Milan have argued, the internet in Iran is best understood as a global and local site of contestation, in which each gain in freedom and connectivity is answered by a corresponding investment in control.³³⁸

This pattern has a direct consequence for how the synthesis reads technological change. The arrival of each platform expanded what women journalists could do and, at the same time, defined the new ground on which they would be pursued by the regime. Opportunity and exposure arrived together, in the same device.

Technology as a Vector for Accelerating Resistance Dynamics

Within those limits, the technological shift did real work, and its principal effect was acceleration. What had taken a print magazine a month to publish, and a court three months to suspend, could in 2022 happen in a single afternoon. Niloofar Hamed's hospital photograph reached the public within hours of being taken, and the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that formed around it at a speed that no print cycle could have produced.³³⁹ The transnational relay compressed the distance between an event inside Iran and its amplification abroad to almost nothing. Technology accelerated the resistance, and, in doing so, it changed its scale.

³³⁶ Khiabany, G. and Sreberny, A. (2010). *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris.

³³⁷ Akhavan, N. (2013). *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

³³⁸ Alimardani, M. and Milan, S. (2018). "The Internet as a Global/Local Site of Contestation: The Case of Iran", in Peeren, E. et al. eds. (2018). *Global Cultures of Contestation: Mobility, Sustainability, Aesthetics and Connectivity*, 171–192, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

³³⁹ On the hospital photograph and the speed of its circulation, see Chapter VI of the present study and the sources cited there.

Digital Repression as a Systemic Response

The regime's answer to the speed of the networks was a digital repression on a matching scale: the near-total internet shutdowns of late 2022, the targeted blocking of platforms, and the use of the same networks to identify and pursue those who used them. It therefore resists any account that treats technology as an unambiguous ally of resistance. Each medium was a contested space before it was anything else.

Gendered Risk as a Cumulative Condition

The Risk Did Not Present Itself as Isolated Episodes but as a Persistent Structural Condition

The arrests, summonses, suspensions, and trials documented across the preceding chapters are easily read as a series of discrete incidents, each with its own date and its own immediate trigger. The synthesis reads them differently. Taken together they describe not a sequence of episodes but a standing condition, a structural exposure attached to the work itself and borne disproportionately by women.

Reading the risk as structural rather than episodic also corrects a familiar interpretive error. As Sirma Bilge has argued in her critique of the subordination-versus-resistance binary, accounts of veiled or constrained Muslim women tend to oscillate between treating them as victims and treating them as heroines, and both readings miss the point that agency and constraint are exercised simultaneously, under the same conditions.³⁴⁰ The women journalists of this study worked under a continuous structural exposure that they neither chose nor escaped, and their agency consisted precisely in what they achieved inside it.

Generational Accumulation: Each Wave of Repression Creates the Conditions for the Next

Each wave of repression altered the terms under which the next generation worked, and it did so in two directions at once. It foreclosed the medium that had just been used, pushing the work onto the next surface, and it transmitted both the discourse and the expectation of cost to those who came after. The closure of *Zanan* in 2008 did not end the reporting and bold questioning of women's rights under the Islamic Republic. It handed that argument, together with the knowledge of what that type of journalism could cost, to the generation that would carry it into the streets in 2022.

Deniz Kandiyoti's account of the patriarchal bargain offers a way to name the longer arc beneath this accumulation. Women, she argued, strategise within concrete constraints, accommodating to the rules of a given patriarchal order in exchange for whatever security and latitude it affords, and the most consequential moments come when those bargains break down, when the old accommodations no longer deliver and the rules themselves are thrown open to contestation.³⁴¹ The four decades this study has traced can be read as the slow exhaustion of one such bargain. The negotiated, lawful caution of the licensed press was a bargain with the perimeter. By 2022, for the generation that had inherited both the discourse and the accumulated record of its punishment, that bargain had ceased to hold.

³⁴⁰ Bilge, S. (2010). "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(1), 9–28.

³⁴¹ Kandiyoti, D. (1988). "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender and Society*, 2(3), 274–90.

Vulnerability as a Transmissible and Formative Experience

The accumulation has a further implication, which is that vulnerability was not only suffered but inherited and, in being inherited, became formative. The younger reporters did not begin from a blank position. They began from the documented knowledge of what had happened to their predecessors, and that knowledge shaped them. Minoo Moallem's analysis of the gendered construction of citizenship in the Islamic Republic is useful here, because it shows that the regime's gender order positioned women not as incidental subjects of policy but as central figures in its symbolic economy.³⁴² To be a woman reporting on women in such a system was to occupy a position the state had already marked as threatening for its stability. The vulnerability attached to that position was transmitted from one cohort to the next as a known feature of the work, and the women who took it up did so with that knowledge rather than in ignorance of it.

Implications for the Understanding of Journalism as a Gendered Risk Profession

The cumulative reading supports the study's broadest empirical claim, which is that journalism in this setting is a gendered risk profession. It bore on women in specific ways, through charges and forms of public exposure that turned on their gender, and it attached to the beats that concerned women's lives most directly. The instrumentalisation of the legal code allowed a press offence and a moral offence to be folded together, so that a woman charged for her interviews and reports could simultaneously be construed as a figure of social deviance. To describe the profession as gendered in its risk is to describe the structure of exposure the preceding chapters documented.

Women This Study Has Followed

Shahla Sherkat

Shahla Sherkat stands at the head of the trajectory. She founded *Zanan* in 1992 and edited it until its closure in 2008, then spent almost seven years pursuing a new licence before relaunching the project as *Zanan-e Emrooz* in 2014. Her achievement was less any single article than the establishment of a durable register in which women's rights could be argued publicly and lawfully, and her own account of the work, the image of the journalist as a tightrope walker with almost no protection, has served this study as the emblem of an entire method.³⁴³ Sherkat made feminism sayable in Iran.

Jila Baniyaghoub

Jila Baniyaghoub built her career at the daily *Hamshahri* and the business paper *Sarmayeh*, where she ran a section on women's economic issues until conservative management cancelled it in 2008, a small closure that already marked the gendered edge of the sayable inside a reformist newsroom. She then made the website *Focus on Iranian Woman* her principal platform. Arrested on 20 June 2009, the same day Neda Agha-Soltan was killed, and detained alongside her husband, the journalist Bahman Ahmadi Amouee, she was sentenced to a year in prison and, more tellingly, to a thirty-year ban from practising journalism, a sentence designed to remove a signature from the field for the length of a career.³⁴⁴ The International Women's Media Foundation,

³⁴² Moallem, M. (2005). *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁴³ Sherkat, "Telling the Stories of Iranian Women's Lives"; Sherkat, Shahrokni and Hasso, "Zanan-e Emrooz", 379–83; On the licensing history of *Zanan-e Emrooz*, see Chapter IV of the present study.

³⁴⁴ "Jila Baniyaghoub", *International Women's Media Foundation*, [biographical note]; International Women's Media Foundation (2009). "Courage in Journalism Award" [citation for Zhila Bani-Yaghoub]; *Amnesty International*, "Iran Must Release Prisoner of Conscience Zhila

awarding her its Courage in Journalism prize that same year, described her as having reported fearlessly on the oppression of women, naming precisely the beat for which she was later imprisoned. From inside Evin she wrote *Women of Evin: Ward 209*, turning the place into a subject.

Shiva Nazar Ahari

Shiva Nazar Ahari, a journalist, blogger, and founding member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, was arrested on 14 June 2009 and held for 102 days, thirty-three of them in solitary confinement in Ward 209, before being released on heavy bail, re-arrested in December, and ultimately sentenced to four years, with the prosecution even reaching for the capital charge of *moharebeh*.³⁴⁵ Her work had consisted of documenting political detentions and abuses, and the charges rested on exactly that documentation. Mahsa Amrabadi, married to the imprisoned journalist Masoud Bastani, followed the same logic on a smaller scale, serving a one-year sentence handed down, in the court's own language, for propagating against the system through interviews and reports. In both cases the reporting and the offence were the same act, described once by the journalist and once by the prosecutor.

Masih Alinejad represents the other reconfiguration that 2009 produced, the one this study treats as the complement of imprisonment rather than its opposite. Forced out of Iran because of her reporting, she rebuilt her work from exile and, with *My Stealthy Freedom*, institutionalised the transnational division of labour that would later become the basic architecture of the 2022 coverage: material gathered inside the country, then editorialised and amplified from abroad.³⁴⁶ Her trajectory shows that the thinning of the domestic field did not end women's journalism but displaced part of it across the border, where it acquired a reach the licensed press had never had and a distance from the events it reported that the domestic reporters did not share.

Niloofer Hamed and Elaheh Mohammadi: The Figures of Crystallisation

The gallery closes with the two reporters in whom the whole trajectory comes to a point. Niloofer Hamed, of the reformist daily *Shargh*, photographed Mahsa Jina Amini's family at Kasra Hospital on 16 September 2022 and posted an image that provided the first journalistic confirmation of Amini's death. Elaheh Mohammadi, of *Ham-Mihan*, drove through the night to cover the funeral in Saqqez. Both were arrested within days, charged with offences that included collaboration with a hostile government, held for some sixteen months, and sentenced to thirteen and twelve years respectively, before an appeal, a period of bail, and the amnesty of February 2025.³⁴⁷ Awarded the UNESCO Guillermo Cano prize in absentia in 2023, they became the emblematic women journalists of the uprising. They are the figures in whom the continuity this chapter has traced and the rupture the next section examines are visible in the same two careers.

Bani-Yaghoub"; "Release Iranian Journalist Bani-Yaghoub", *Voice of America*, 2 May 2013.

³⁴⁵ Iran: Case Sheet, Shiva Nazar Ahari, *Amnesty International*, 2010; "Shiva Nazar Ahari", *Committee to Protect Journalists*; "Mahsa Amrabadi", *Committee to Protect Journalists*; "Iranian Journalist Sentenced to Jail", *Radio Zamaneh*, 21 February 2012.

³⁴⁶ On Alinejad's exile and the building of *My Stealthy Freedom*, see the relevant chapter of the present study and the sources cited there.

³⁴⁷ On Hamed and Mohammadi, the arrests, the espionage charges, the trial, the sentences, and the February 2025 amnesty, see Chapters V and VI of the present study and the sources cited there.

2022 to 2025: Rupture, Crystallisation, or Both?

Arguments in Favour of the Break

There is a strong case for reading 2022 as a genuine rupture, and it is worth examining it. The scale of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement was unprecedented, reaching across provinces, classes, and ethnic communities in a way the earlier uprisings had not. The global visibility was without parallel, sustained by a transnational relay that placed images from Iranian streets onto screens worldwide within hours. And the relationship to the red lines was qualitatively new. The reporters of 2022 did not negotiate. The deliberate crossing of lines that the licensed press had spent decades carefully respecting marks a real discontinuity, and any account that dissolves it into mere continuity understates what changed.

Arguments in Favour of Continuity

The case for continuity is equally strong, and most of this study has been its demonstration. The practices that erupted in 2022 had a genealogy. The iconographic template, the image of a dead young woman around which a movement forms, had been set in 2009. The transnational division of labour had been institutionalised in the intervening decade. The networks that carried the coverage pre-existed it. The feminist discourse that gave the movement its grammar had been built by the licensed press a generation earlier. As Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi has argued, the uprising is best understood not as a sudden eruption but as the surfacing of a conjunctural crisis with deep and multiple lineages, the convergence of contradictions that had been accumulating for decades.³⁴⁸ On this reading, 2022 did not come from nowhere. It came from everywhere the preceding chapters have been.

Synthesis Proposal: Crystallisation as an Intermediate Concept

The synthesis declines to choose between these two readings, because the choice is too categorical. The concept it proposes instead is crystallisation. A crystal does not appear from nothing, and it is not identical to the solution from which it forms. It is the sudden ordering, under the right conditions, of material that was already present but dispersed. This is what 2022 did to four decades of women's journalism under the Islamic Republic, without forgetting a century of women's journalism since the first newspaper *Danish* in 1912. The discourse, the networks, the iconographic vocabulary, the transnational relay, and the accumulated knowledge of risk were all already present, in solution, throughout the period. The death of Mahsa Jina Amini and the conditions of the months that followed it provided the seed around which they ordered themselves at once, into a form that was visible, simultaneous, and irreversible.

Crystallisation preserves what is true in both of the rival readings. It honours the continuity, because the material was genuinely inherited and nothing in the structure was created from scratch. It honours the rupture, because the ordered form was genuinely new and could not be returned to solution once it had set. Peyman Jafari's reading of the events as a revolt carried out with a revolutionary perspective, rooted in long histories yet oriented toward a transformation its predecessors had not demanded, captures the same double character.³⁴⁹ So does Arash Azizi's account of a generation that articulated, in the slogan Woman, Life, Freedom, demands that had been latent in Iranian society for years before they were spoken in the streets.³⁵⁰ What the intermediate concept adds is precision about the mechanism. The change was the sudden ordering of old material and subjects into a new and stable form.

³⁴⁸ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, E. (2023). "Iran's Uprisings for 'Women, Life, Freedom': Over-Determination, Crisis, and the Lineages of Revolt", *Politics*, 43(3), 404–38.

³⁴⁹ Jafari, P. (2023). "Revolt with a Revolutionary Perspective", *Iranian Studies*, 56(3).

³⁵⁰ Azizi, A. (2024). *What Iranians Want: Women, Life, Freedom*, London: Oneworld Publishing.

What 2022 Reconfigured in Iranian Women's Journalism

If crystallisation describes the mechanism, irreversibility describes the result, and the result is what the period changed for good. As Farhad Khosrokhavar has argued, the Mahsa movement broke a barrier of fear and of legitimacy that the Islamic Republic had relied upon, and that kind of break does not reverse simply because the streets grow quiet.³⁵¹ For women's journalism specifically, three things appear unlikely to return to their prior state. The fiction of the red line as a stable, negotiable perimeter has been exposed and cannot be restored, because the reporters of 2022 demonstrated that it could be crossed and that crossing it was a defensible professional act. The transnational relay has been normalised as the basic architecture of coverage rather than an exceptional measure. Lastly, the figure of the woman journalist as the one who documents the rupture has become a recognised and emblematic role.

A crystal can be dissolved only by changing the conditions that hold it, and the conditions this study has traced, the discourse, the networks, the inherited knowledge of cost, remain in place. The work that *Zanan* began under licence in 1992 and that Niloofar Hamedí and Elaheh Mohammadi continued in 2022 was not a sequence of separate undertakings that shared a subject. It was one undertaking, conducted by women who understood themselves as belonging to it, and 2022 was the year it became impossible to pretend otherwise.

³⁵¹ Khosrokhavar, F. (2024). *Revolt Against Theocracy: The Mahsa Movement and the Feminist Uprising in Iran*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Conclusion

This study reaches its conclusion in the aftermath of recent events. In the last days of December 2025, as the national currency collapsed, protests over the cost of living spread from the bazaar of Tehran across the country, and most fiercely through the Kurdish-majority west. On 3 January 2026, in Malekshahi, in Ilam province, Revolutionary Guard and Basij forces opened fire on an unarmed march; several young people were killed and dozens wounded, and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch described scenes reminiscent of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising of 2022. Mass killings were reported on 8 and 9 January in which allegedly tens of thousands of people were killed, although the scale of the death toll was difficult to establish independently. On 8 January the regime cut the country's internet and telephone lines, imposing a near-total communications blackout that would become one of the most severe and prolonged the country had ever experienced. The day before the blackout, on 7 January, Elaheh Mohammadi pinned to her account a Ham-Mihan investigation into the aftermath of the Malekshahi crackdown and security-force incursions into hospitals in Ilam. Eyewitnesses described a peaceful protest fired upon, the wounded carried into Imam Khomeini Hospital, security forces removing the bodies from the wards and standing before the blood-transfusion centre so that no one could donate. The report set the eyewitness account against the official version, in which the provincial authorities blamed unnamed rioting elements. It was the method this study has called fearless journalism, practised again, on the same terrain, by one of the two women with whom these final chapters were concerned.

She was not alone, and the cost remained what the study described. Reporters Without Borders counted more than twenty journalists already in detention as the blackout fell, and the arrests continued through the following weeks: Vida Rabbani, a freelance reporter who had written for Shargh, was imprisoned again on 31 January for signing an open letter against the repression, and Alieh Motalabzadeh and Sepideh Gholian were among those seized. Narges Mohammadi, the imprisoned journalist and Nobel laureate whose prison testimony this study read as journalism by other means, was assaulted during her arrest in December 2025 and had her sentence lengthened once more in February 2026. With the domestic press silenced and the network severed, news from the country reached the outside world through outlets abroad, exactly the in-Iran and in-exile division of labour the study traced from the death of Neda Agha-Soltan to *My Stealthy Freedom*.

Then the ground shifted beneath the protests entirely. On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched an awaited attack that killed the Supreme Leader and much of the senior leadership and opened a war that would run for months. The blackout deepened, and the judiciary announced that it would meet those who collaborated with the enemy with its harshest penalties, ordering the seizure of the assets of more than four hundred journalists and artists abroad. The accusation was the one this study has met at every turn, from Neda's video in 2009 to the espionage charge against Hamed and Mohammadi in 2022: the foreign agent, the collaborator, the spy, reached for once again at the moment the state could no longer control the account. The period this thesis closes on, from 2022 to 2025, did not end with the pardons of February 2025; within months it was carried into a new round of killing, blackout, and war.

The study began, three years before that dispatch from Malekshahi, with another photograph. On the morning of 16 September 2022, Niloofar Hamed walked into Kasra Hospital in Tehran, photographed Mahsa Jina Amini's grieving family in an empty corridor, and posted the image to a public account. The chapters that followed have argued that this act, and the funeral dispatch Elaheh Mohammadi filed from Saqqez the following day, cannot be read as the sudden appearance of courage in a void. They were the most recent expression of a tradition four decades deep, and on a longer reckoning more than a century deep, running back to the first female magazine *Danish* in 1912. The previous chapter closed on a question: how that inheritance might be carried forward by the women who will report the next events. This conclusion gathers the argument that question

rests on, weighs it against the inquiry that opened the study, and sets out both what the research contributes and what it leaves for others to complete.

The Trajectory in Summary

The study reconstructed the evolution of women's journalistic practice across five periods, each mapped onto a distinct configuration of state power.

Three analytical concepts carried the argument across these periods. The first is **fearless journalism**, defined not as the absence of fear but as a practice of truth-telling under conditions where it is punishable. The second is **gendered vulnerability**, which the study read as a cumulative structural condition, attached to the work itself, and transmitted from one generation to the next as a known feature of the profession. The third is **epistemic resistance**, drawn in part from Van Zoonen's feminist media studies, which reframes the women journalists of Iran from objects of repression into subjects of knowledge production, and asks not only what was done to them but what they did, what they knew, and what their practice preserved.

The periodisation that organises this account reveals the relation between journalistic practice and the deeper configurations of state power, regulatory regime, and gender politics; it allows the licensed magazine, the blog, and the social platform to be read as successive answers to successive closures. The periods overlap; the modalities persist across the lines drawn between them; and the scheme carries a standing temptation to read the whole as a runway toward 2022. As Nayereh Tohidi and Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi both state, the uprising drew on deep roots while being triggered by a contingent event, and no accumulation of media resources could have predetermined that it would occur, or that it would take the form it did.

What emerges from the five periods together is a paradigm specific to its context. *Fearless Journalism* is not a universal mode that any reporter might display, but one that belongs to the threshold between total repression, where no such journalism can circulate, and openness, where the category loses its force. It is the journalism of a leaky media ecology under an authoritarian state, and in the Iranian case it acquired a further, gendered dimension: the female body became at once the object of the reporting and the instrument of the protest, the surface on which the state wrote its claims to authenticity and the surface on which those claims were contested.

Re-examining the Central Question

The study asked how the role of women in Iranian media evolved from the post-revolutionary period to the post-Woman, Life, Freedom era, and whether what Hamed and Mohammadi did in 2022 should be understood as a radical transformation or as a continuous evolution. Three nested sub-questions structured the inquiry: *what political, social, and cultural forces drove the successive shifts; in what ways the fearless journalism of 2022 extended, radicalised, or departed from the strategies of earlier figures such as Sherkat; and why women journalists have so rarely been theorised as producers of resistant knowledge rather than simply as its victims.*

Four recurring factors can be identified which have served as the drivers of change across every period examined here. The first is **state regulation**: the licensing mechanism, the deliberately imprecise press law, the duality of an executive that could authorise and a judiciary that could imprison, which set the perimeter that women's practice was forever testing. The second is **technology**, which at each period of transition opened a space and almost immediately drew a new perimeter around it, so that opportunity and exposure arrived together as part of the same device. The third is **networks**: the licensed press, the exile platforms, the diaspora newsrooms, and the domestic desks were never sealed off from one another, and the relationships among the women who sustained them outlived every individual title the state could ban. The fourth is **feminist**

culture, the discourse first made visible by *Zanan*, which by Hamed's generation was no longer a thesis to be defended but a feature of the landscape it inherited.

Implications for the Global Debate on Press Freedom

Beyond Iranian studies, the case carries implications for how journalism under authoritarian rule is analysed more broadly. The Iranian record offers a model for understanding a recurrent state grammar: by folding a press offence into a security offence, the act of independent witness is recast as collaboration with a hostile power. It offers, too, a model of the in-Iran and in-exile division of resistance that emerges wherever a domestic press is jailed and an expatriated one verifies and amplifies from outside the country.

For the organisations that defend press freedom, this carries a concrete recommendation. The annual censuses of Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, and PEN International, together with the recognition conferred by UNESCO, WAN-IFRA, and the International Women's Media Foundation, supplied much of the documentation on which this study relied; the archive built by IranWire and its Journalism Is Not a Crime project made the systematic targeting of women journalists visible at all. The study suggests that this work would be sharpened by tracking not only how many journalists are imprisoned but how the moral and the political charge are combined against women specifically, and by treating the gendered beat as itself a category of risk.

Limits of the Study and Directions for Future Research

The study's conclusions are bounded by its methods. It rests on published reportage, NGO and institutional documentation, and secondary scholarship, and not on direct interviews with the journalists at its centre. That limit is partly a matter of necessity: many of the actors are imprisoned, in exile, or at continuing risk, and an interview can be a liability rather than a source. It is also a matter of access, since the archives of the Iranian women's press are dispersed, partially digitised, and in places deliberately erased. The published record on which the study draws is itself shaped by what could be said and what could survive the Press Court, and any reading of it inherits that shaping. A later study with safe access to its subjects, or to fuller archives, might revise the balance the present one has struck between what the sources show and what they were permitted to record.

The study is bounded geographically as well. Its centre of gravity is mainland Iran, with the diaspora attended to mainly where it intersected the domestic field, in the transnational relays of *My Stealthy Freedom*, IranWire, and BBC Persian. A full account of diasporic women's journalism, of the careers built and the institutions sustained outside the country, remains to be written, and it would test how far the trajectory described here holds once the connection to the domestic readership is severed.

Two avenues for future research follow most directly. The fearless-journalism paradigm was developed from a single national case, and its claim to be exportable can only be tested by carrying it to other settings where journalists work under high repression and a leaky media ecology. Such comparison would clarify which features of the Iranian case are specific to it and which belong to the structure of authoritarian journalism as such.

The press on which this account was centred was largely Persian-language and urban, and its women journalists were, for the most part, reporting from and for the centre. Yet the slogan *Jin, Jinan, Azadi*, that named the movement rose first in Kurdistan, and the deadliest single day of the crackdown, Bloody Friday, fell in Zahedan, in Baluchistan, where, as one witness observed, the very absence of independent media kept the deaths off the international record. As Somayeh Rostampour argues in her account of the hierarchies internal to Iranian feminism, the movement

has its own centres and peripheries, and the women of its margins have rarely been written into its history on their own terms. Yalda Hamidi makes the cognate point for the field itself, that Iranian studies has too often imagined the nation as Persian, Shia, and urban, and has lacked the frameworks to grasp a movement carried in part by its minorities and rural constituencies. A history of Iranian women's journalism attentive to Kurdish, Baluch, or Azeri reporters would not simply add cases to the gallery. It would test whether the trajectory this study described is a national story or a metropolitan one, and that test is among the most important that this work leaves undone.

The conclusion cannot say when the next rupture will come, as such things are always impossible to predict. However, the capacities are in place, the discourse, the networks, the inherited knowledge of cost. The fire that Sherkat described being hidden under ash in the 1980s was passed, from one generation of women to the next, and in 2022 it was carried into a hospital corridor and a Kurdish cemetery by two reporters who knew exactly what it would cost them to be seen carrying it. The voices this study has traced were never granted, they were taken, kept, and handed on. That is the history these chapters have tried to write.

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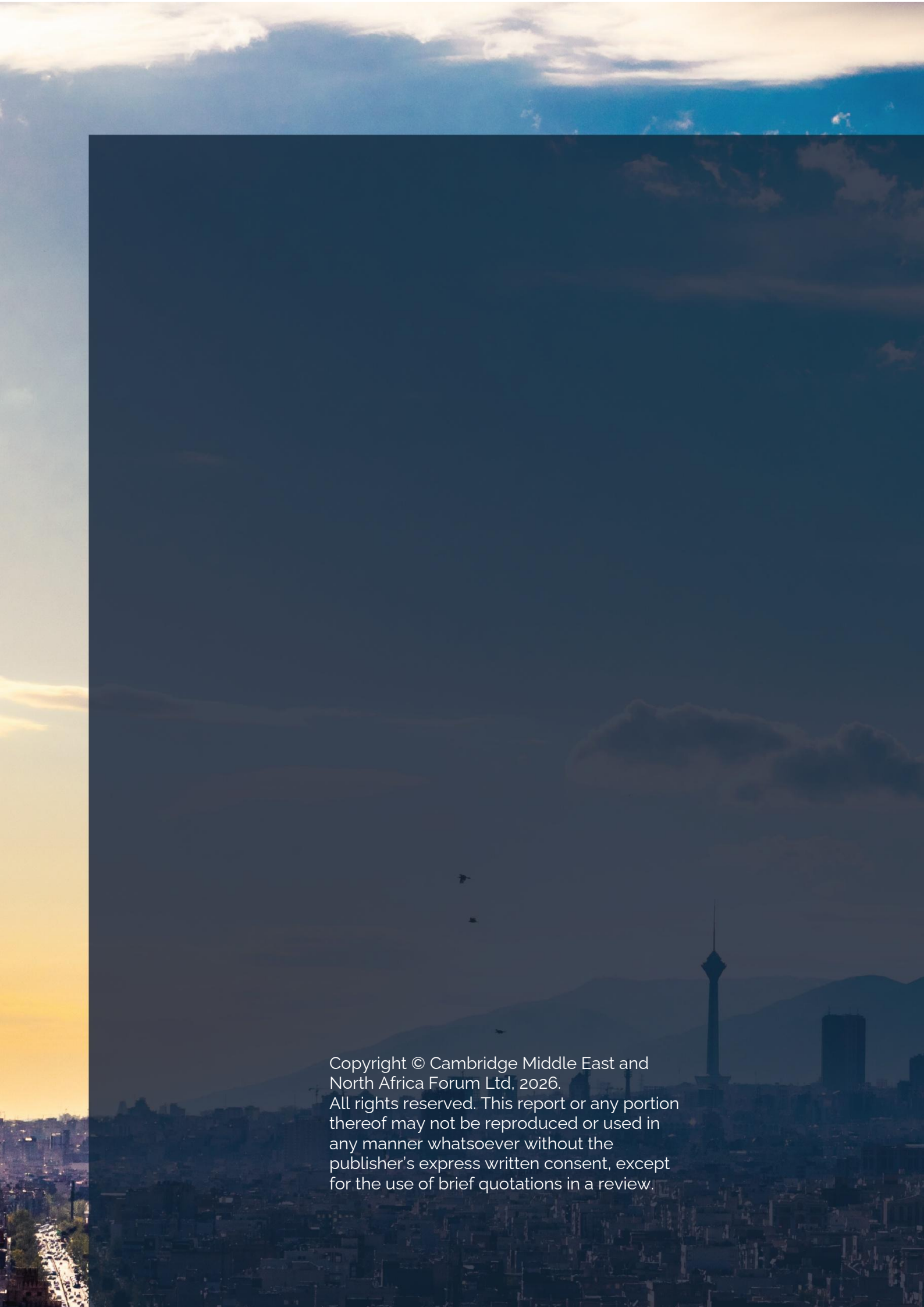
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