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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Intersectional Experiences of Iranian Feminists from Minoritized Ethno-National Backgrounds

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Abstract: Over the past decades, Iran has been witnessing the growth of a burgeoning feminist movement. With its origins deeply rooted in the early 20th century, the Iranian feminist movement, as such, is not a uniform body: it embodies various, opposing even, political ideologies under the umbrella of feminism, reflecting the divergent social locations of its protagonists. While the movement has been criticized for its centralist, middle-class and at times apolitical tendencies, academic scholarship has yet to offer intersectional analyses that problematize historically rooted and daily materialized relations of power within the movement, particularly in relation to axes such as ethnicity (and race), religion, gender identity, sexuality, and (dis)ability. In light of this gap, the present article aims towards documenting and theorizing the intersectionality of the challenges facing Iranian feminist activists belonging to various ethnic nations and religious beliefs. Drawing on ethnographic research, it argues that minority feminists find themselves between a rock and a hard place: the rock being masculinist politics within their minoritized communities, which prioritize ethno-nationalist demands over gendered ones; the hard place being a centralist liberal feminist movement that fails to reflect the intersectionality of their experiences as non-Persian non-Shia women, thereby reproducing hierarchies of power in relation to ethnicity, religion, and class.

Keywords: intersectionality; feminism; Iran; Iranian feminist movement; gendered discrimination; gendered racism



Citation: Ahmadi, Donya. 2024. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Intersectional Experiences of Iranian Feminists from Minoritized Ethno-National Backgrounds. *Religions* 15: 533. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050533>

Academic Editors: Patricia Schor and Luis Manuel Hernandez Aguilar

Received: 6 November 2023

Revised: 4 March 2024

Accepted: 8 April 2024

Published: 25 April 2024



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1. Introduction

On 16 September 2022, 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian Jina (Mahsa) Amini died in the Kasra hospital of Tehran. She had been taken to the hospital three days prior, due to head injuries she had suffered while being arrested by the Iranian morality police, leading to a cerebral hemorrhage that eventually resulted in her death (Strzyżyńska 2022). The shock of Jina's brutal and untimely killing turned into a widespread public outrage almost instantly, sparking mass protests first in Kurdistan and soon after the rest of the country. On 17 September, Jina was buried in her birth city of Saqqez amidst high security, surrounded by a protesting crowd that chanted the Kurdish slogan of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom). Some women reportedly removed their headscarves in protest to the compulsory hijab rule that cost Jina her young life. The funeral ended in the violent suppression of the crowd by security forces (Khatam 2023). The images of the state-initiated violence as well as of Jina's tombstone reading "Jina giyan, to namiri, nawit ebete remiz" (Dear Jina, you won't die, your name will become a symbol) circulated widely on social media and sparked what was to become the biggest mass uprising since the 1979 revolution over the next months. Known widely as the Jina uprising ("Khizesh-e-Jina") or the Woman, Life, Freedom movement ("Jonbesh-e-zan zendegi azadi"), the nationwide movement adopted the Kurdish slogan and mobilized an unprecedented number of Iranian women (many younger in age than Jina) across the country (Ahmadi 2023b). Jina's name had indeed become a symbol for the fight against the decades-long gendered oppression facing Iranian women, especially those on the margins, in the name of political Islam.

For many Iranian ethnic minorities, however, Jina's name symbolized an additional fight, one against assimilation to a uniform Iranian identity and the systemic oppression facing Iranian ethnic nations, in particular Kurds, for well over a century. While Jina's Kurdish roots are not unknown to most, her name has become a source of debate, and at times, polarization. Some Kurdish feminists have gone so far as to call Mahsa a colonial name, highlighting the assimilationist politics that necessitated opting for a Persian name (Mahsa) over a Kurdish one (Jina) for official registration upon birth. The Jina uprising marked an important moment in contemporary Iranian history, owing not only to its prioritization of feminist demands such as bodily autonomy and gender equality. For the first time in recent history, the systemic marginalization facing minoritized ethnic nations as well as their political autonomy became topics of discussion nationwide. This was in large part due to the frontline role assumed by historically marginalized communities in areas such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan in spearheading the protests and the unprecedented display of cross-ethnic solidarity among them, exemplified by the widespread use of slogans such as "Kurd tanya nia, Baloch peshtiwania" (Kurd is not alone, Baluch is behind you), and "Kurdistan Kurdistan cheshm-o cheragh-e Iran" (Kurdistan, Kurdistan, you are the eye and light of Iran) in protests across the country.

Such cross-ethnic recognition and mobilizing did not go without backlash. Protests in Sunni-majority Baluchistan and Kurdistan were largely dubbed by state media as separatist struggles, invoking century-long stereotypes that securitized many of Iran's ethnic nations, and in particular, those residing in border areas and with strong transnational ties overseas, as threats to the country's territorial integrity and border security. Likewise, parts of the opposition to the Islamic Republic (hereafter IRI)—in particular, pro-monarchy and nationalist factions—expressed similar concerns regarding the growing focus on ethnic mobilization and sovereignty. In an interview with the London-based Manoto TV aired in January 2023, Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah, referred to territorial integrity ("tamamiat-e arzi") of Iran as his absolute red line, stating that if an ounce of Iranian soil was moved, Iran would not be Iran anymore (Pahlavi 2022).

Nationalist sentiments are not exclusive to the masculinist forces within the opposition. Similar debates have surfaced within the Iranian feminist movement. With its roots deeply embedded in the constitutional movement of late 19th century, the Iranian women's movement underwent various waves of suppression, co-optation, and revival throughout the 20th century. Various scholars have pointed towards the importance of the women's rights discourse in constituting Iranian nationalism under both Pahlavi and Islamic regimes (Paidar 1997; Sanasarian 1982). In her groundbreaking work on the story of the daughters of Quchan, Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998) successfully demonstrates the gendered origins of Iranian nationalism, showcasing how the concepts of the homeland ("vatan") and nation ("mellat") emerged as feminine and masculine entities, respectively, throughout the constitutional period. The homeland thus came to embody a feminized object in need of male supervision and protection, while the nation evolved as the agentic masculine subject tasked with protecting both the sovereignty of the former's territories and the purity of its women (Ahmadi 2023a).

The contemporary Iranian feminist movement, as such, is not a uniform body. It embodies various, opposing even, political ideologies under the umbrella of feminism, reflecting the divergent social locations of its protagonists. While the movement has been criticized for its rootedness in the urban bourgeoisie, as well as its centralist, elitist, and, at times, apolitical tendencies, academic scholarship has yet to offer intersectional analyses that problematize the inner hierarchies of power reproduced within the movement, particularly in relation to axes such as ethnicity (and race), religion, gender identity, sexuality, and (dis)ability. As such, feminist scholarship on the topic has itself fallen prey to the centralism ("Markaz-gara'i") plaguing the Iranian feminist movement, rendering invisible the crucial role played by women located at Iran's margins (both literally and figuratively). In light of this gap, the present article aims towards documenting and theorizing the intersectionality of the challenges facing Iranian feminist activists belonging to various ethnic nations and

religious beliefs. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with six Iranian feminist activists from minoritized ethno-national backgrounds, it takes an important first step towards highlighting their contributions, modes of resistance, and lived experiences at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, and class (among others).

The structure of this article is as follows. The second section provides a brief historical overview of the Iranian women's movement and its role in the consolidation and expansion of Iranian nationalism since the 20th century. Thereafter, a brief methodology section is presented in which the chosen methods of data collection and analysis are introduced and substantiated. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis, followed by a final concluding section that synthesizes the findings and discusses avenues for future research and praxis.

2. The Iranian Women's Movement and Nationalism: A Historical Marriage

Iranian women's bodies and political demands proved pivotal for the modernization project of the Pahlavi I and II eras and the Islamization project of the post-revolutionary establishment alike. Parvin [Paidar \(1997\)](#) posits that the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 changed the foundations of Iranian nationalism. Reza Shah's emphasis on building a uniform nation, with his military-style leadership, effectively shifted the nature and direction of Iranian nationalism from a domain of independent political activity during the Constitutional era to a top-down state-led project, the success of which necessitated the establishment of a centralized bureaucracy. [Sanasarian \(2000\)](#) similarly posits that state policy on ethno-nationals and religious minorities during Reza Shah's reign (1925–41) was shaped with the goals of homogenizing society by doing away with ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity completely through assimilation into a homogenized 'Iranian' identity:

New dress codes, mandatory teaching of the Persian language in schools, abolition of titles (such as mirza, amir, shaykh, khan), changes in place names (streets, towns, cities, provinces), and even the 1935 order to foreign governments to call the country Iran instead of Persia were all aimed at creating a unified (nation-)state. These changes reflected the policy of linguistic de-ethnicizing of Iran by merging territorial entitlement with the Persianized monarchical center (e.g., Lurestan became Kermanshah, Arabestan became Khuzestan). Tribal and rural communities were forced into compliance with the central government. To destroy ethnic cohesion, segments of ethnic groups were moved to other areas. Sometimes the lands belonging to one family were given to another in the same ethnic grouping in order to weaken cohesion and to instigate intra-ethnic hostility. Homogenization of society was the desired goal of the ruler (15).

Reza Shah's suppression of independent political activity, including the grassroots women's organizations of the Constitutional period, further marked a new period in the Iranian women's movement. Through establishing a centralized women's society called "Kanoon-e-Banovan" to streamline women's political activities, Reza Shah, on the one hand, successfully depoliticized and domesticated the women's movement. On the other hand, he instrumentalized women's involvement to project a modernizing image of Iran to the world. Kanoon-e Banovan later acted as an important vessel for promoting the contested unveiling decree of 1936 ([Bamdad and Bagley 1977](#)). The unveiling decree constituted an important pillar in Reza Shah's top-down women's renewal program ("tajaddod-e-nesvan"), which advocated a renewed vision of the modern Iranian woman as "depoliticized, domesticated, and above all, [...] loyal to the state-led nationalist cause" ([Ahmadi 2023a](#), p. 14; see also [Kashani-Sabet 2005](#)).

Following in his father's footsteps, Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979) continued to centralize women's organizations and unified their leadership, further de-coupling their activities from politics. Even though Mohammad Reza Shah's pursuit of women's emancipation was partial and remained strictly in line with his modernization program, the centralized women's movement was nonetheless successful in achieving important milestones during this period, such as suffrage and political appointment. Between 1963

and 1965, six women were elected to the “Majles” (Iranian parliament) as deputies, two were appointed by the Shah as senators, and one was appointed as the first female minister in Iranian history. The ratification of the Family Protection Law in 1975 and the legalization of abortion up to 12 weeks in 1977 further brought about important changes in women’s rights in the domestic realm (Paidar 1997).

While these gendered developments were crucial to reinforcing the image of Pahlavi-era Iran as a country on its way to modernization, the impact they carried for Iranian women belonging to different socio-economic, geographic, and ethno-national backgrounds varied drastically. Paidar (1997) posits that middle-class and affluent women residing in urban centers remained the main beneficiaries of Mohammad Reza Shah’s gendered reforms. Meanwhile, the land reforms implemented by Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1960s as part of his White Revolution program and the rapid urbanization that followed further exacerbated the repressive conditions facing most rural and working-class women (Ahmadi 2023a). The breakdown of the tribal structure in rural Iran initiated by Reza Shah, and the growing emphasis on Persian nationalism as the state ideology under Mohammad Reza Shah, further resulted in the suppression (material as well as cultural) of rural communities of non-Persian and non-Shia backgrounds. Mohammad Reza Shah’s approach towards ethno-national and religious minorities resembled the divide and conquer strategy he had adopted in relation to the women’s movement. The aim was to control and coopt those in the opposition, including ethnic and religious elites. Sanasarian (2000) similarly argues that while the late Shah’s minority policy emphasized assimilation and undermined the citizens’ diverse cultural values, ethnic and religious identities remained meaningful to the ruler and were used to advance the cause of the centralized state. To Mohammad Reza Shah, the homogenization of the Iranian identity thus did not require the complete erasure of ethnic and religious difference. Rather, a combination of cooptative and coercive measures was used to simultaneously appeal to the elite and ensure compliance.

This pattern of co-optation and coercion was continued and expanded by the Islamic regime following the 1979 revolution. According to Sanasarian (2000), while the clerical-led regime was cognizant of the ethnic and religious diversity of Iran from the onset and acknowledged Iran’s plurality in its constitution, this did not preclude the use or threat of use of coercion. In regards to religious minorities, the (partial) acceptance was never extended to communities that are not recognized in the constitution, particularly Baha’is, whom the state has routinely targeted for violence and prosecution over the past four and a half decades. In addition to coercion, a wide range of political, economic, and socio-cultural tools along with institutional arrangements and legal frameworks have been utilized to effectively control constitutionally accepted religious minorities and ethno-national communities (Ibid).

The revolutionary era provided Iran’s historically marginalized ethno-nationals with a brief opportunity to organize around their national identities and express their opposition to the monarchical regime’s decades-old policies of socio-political exclusion and economic deprivation. However, their demands for socio-cultural and political autonomy quickly placed these communities in opposition to the newly established provisional government in the center (Hassaniyan 2019). Such tensions became apparent on 17 February 1979, a mere six days after the so-called Islamic Revolution’s victory day, when the military garrison in the Kurdish city of Mahabad was compelled to surrender to the Kurdish authorities in the city. The Islamic government under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in turn, used this occasion to accuse the Kurds of being anti-revolutionary. Following failed negotiations between Kurdish delegations and the central authorities, tensions escalated into an armed confrontation that continued until November 1979. Similar uprisings were simultaneously taking place in Turkmensahra, where Sunni-majority Iranian Turkmens, joined by Marxist Fada’iyan guerillas, had entered into an armed struggle against the post-revolutionary government over the locals’ demands for land reform (Vahabzadeh 2010). The Iran–Iraq war further provided the Iranian state with the opportunity to militantly curtail any form of resistance, including demands for local autonomy. Sheyholislami (2012) is thus correct

in observing that despite paying lip service to plurality, the IRI's policy in regards to ethno-national minorities does not deviate much from that of the Pahlavi era. Both regimes adopted the "one-nation one-language" approach as their official policy, treated ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity as a threat to the country's territorial integrity and national unity, and promoted the supremacy of the Persian language and culture as a basis for unifying the heterogeneous Iranian body politic.

The Islamic regime's response to the women's movement was just as swift and heavy-handed as its approach towards dealing with quests for ethno-national autonomy. Even though Iranian women had contributed a great deal to the revolutionary uprisings of 1979, their rights came under direct attack by the provisional government within days of its establishment:

The Family Protection Act of 1975 was the first comprehensive legislation of the Pahlavi Era to be abolished as part of the new regime's Islamization policy. In the following weeks, the new government announced a range of new developments targeting gendered relations and women's civic rights; by the end of March 1979, only weeks after the victory of the revolution, women had been barred from becoming judges, abortion had been declared illegal, sports had become segregated and coeducation had been banned. (Ahmadi 2023a, pp. 37–38)

Much like the state nationalism of the Pahlavi era, the Islamization policy of the IRI had a strong gendered dimension from the onset. The coming into effect of the mandatory Hijab law in 1983 (Milani 1992) helped fully consolidate the government's Islamization program on the bodies of Iranian women. While Reza Shah's Hijab ban and the IRI's compulsory veiling law may appear opposite at first glance, the policies were, in fact, identical in their instrumentalization of the veil for advancing the nationalist identity of each state, and the oppressive tools through which they were implemented. The veil, previously used as a form of protest against the monarchy, thus became the emblem of the new Islamic state, which was imposed through legislation and enforced via coercive measures taken by the militia as well as official state agents. It further pushed women into the domestic realm, restricting their access to resources for political organization and participation (Moghadam 1992; Sedghi 2020).

The IRI's hypersensitivity to the issue of gender, along with the continued violent suppression of any form of political dissent, have severely undermined the women's movement over the past decades, resulting in its further atomization and individualization. The short-lived periods of moderate rule in the post-war decades, particularly the 8-year presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), opened small windows of opportunity for women's activists to mobilize around various campaigns (such as the One Million Signatures Campaign; see Bayat 2013; Sameh 2014). However, much of women's political activism during this period adopted a reformist approach that necessitated working within an Islamic-and-feminist framework that would challenge but not undermine the state (Sameh 2014). Sedghi (2020) similarly posits that reformist feminism in this period, exemplified by the One Million Signatures Campaign, actively distanced itself from more politicized iterations of feminist activism by claiming to avoid affiliation with any political ideology or party (particularly leftist and ethno-nationalist ones). Nonetheless, even the reformist feminism of the post-Khatami era, with its limited scope and non-violent methods, proved to be too threatening to the IRI regime, resulting in mass arrests and the widespread prosecution and harassment of feminist activists, which are ongoing to this day. The political repression facing feminists, coupled with the increasing securitization of ethno-national communities, have further contributed to the deepening of the center vs. periphery divide within the movement, exacerbating its historically rooted centralist, Persian nationalist, and elitist tendencies.

3. Methods

The present article draws on co-ethnographic research. Co-ethnography or collaborative ethnography is "an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly em-

phasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process” (Lassiter 2022, p. 16). Co-ethnography is increasingly practiced in anthropological studies that work closely with activists, local communities, and resistance movements, particularly in the so-called Global South. The emphasis on collaboration allows for the possibility of defining ethnographic research projects according to the priorities and needs of (local) protagonists, thus carving out space for alternative research agendas as well as modes of analysis less attended to in mainstream scholarship (Rappaport 2008). As such, co-ethnography is an appropriate method for bringing to the forefront the analyses of the historically marginalized. My approach to co-ethnography further builds on Jennifer Manning’s notion of “decolonial feminist ethnography” (Manning 2021), which focuses on the works and lives of the marginalized, enabling the researcher to address the colonality of knowledge and to actively consider and reflect the ethical and political implications of knowledge production. Engaging in co-ethnography in the context of the present study thus necessitated reflexivity and active engagement with questions of power and positionality throughout the research process, as well as foregrounding the final analysis in the protagonists’ lived experiences, worldviews, and situated knowledges.

The empirical data for this study were collected through participant observations and in-depth interviews, carried out between October 2022 and April 2023. The observations took place in various feminist spaces (including gatherings, panel discussions, and demonstrations) organized in the aftermath of the Jina uprising both online and in person (in the Netherlands and Sweden). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six feminist activists of non-Persian ethno-national backgrounds. The interview sample comprised feminist activists from Kurdish, Gilac, Turkish, Baluch, Hazara, and Afghan backgrounds, all of whom identified as women and were between the ages of 30 and 45. Out of the six informants, two were of non-Shia religious backgrounds, with the other four being born Shia Muslims. The interviews took place online, with individual interview sessions lasting from 70 to 100 min. On multiple occasions, informants were interviewed more than once so as to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences while allowing sufficient time for reflection as well as breaks. The interviews were recorded with the informants’ permission and later transcribed. The transcripts were then translated from Farsi to English by the author and analyzed thematically.

Informants were identified through various channels including the participant observation sites, social media, and snowballing. Taking into account the IRI’s sensitivity to the subject matter at hand and the potential repercussions facing political dissidents inside Iran, the sample entirely comprised feminist activists in exile, residing in Europe and North America. This was a conscious choice made by the author so as to prioritize the safety of the research informants, albeit at the risk of missing out on the important perspectives of ethno-national-minority feminists who live and are politically active within the country. This study’s exclusive focus on voices in exile inadvertently means that the findings may not be fully representative of the experiences of all Iranian feminist activists. The contributions of this study should thus be understood in the context of its methodological constraints. Verbal informed consent was acquired prior to each interview session. The informants were further consulted regarding their preferences for anonymity; out of the six protagonists, two requested anonymity, three did not express any preference either way, and one explicitly requested to be named so as to counter the absence of ethno-national voices within mainstream feminist discourses. The multiplicity of the informants’ places of residence, and the subsequent logistical constraints in conducting fieldwork, informed the decision to conduct interviews online.

This study builds on and contributes towards a growing body of work that investigates transnational iterations of feminist activism, and in particular, the social justice struggles of non-Western women and women of the Two-Thirds World (Mohanty 2003), through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality provides an important analytical toolkit for understanding the interconnected ways in which various categories of power dialectically

shape Iranian feminists' identities and lived experiences. Collins (2015) defines intersectionality as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2). The term was originally coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her essay "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and anti-racist politics," Crenshaw problematized the single-axis analysis that dominated anti-discrimination law, as well as feminist and anti-racist activism in the US, resulting in the theoretical erasure of Black women. This entailed the implicit centrality of the white female experience in conceptualizing sexist discrimination, on the one hand, and the grounding of the experiences of male and/or class-privileged Black persons in anti-racist doctrine, on the other. The taken-for-grantedness of the Black male experience in anti-racist activism, according to Crenshaw (1989), further resulted in the specific articulation of Black women's political interests as well as the intersectional aspects of their subordination being perceived as "dangerously divisive" (148). Black feminists thus found themselves caught between a color-blind feminist movement that ignored intra-category differences among women, and an anti-racist movement that prioritized race over gender, both ignoring the intricate ways in which the two categories inform and shape one another.

Bell hooks (2000) likewise problematizes mainstream feminism's lack of attention to the ways in which racial politics and class structures shape the category of womanhood. For hooks, much of contemporary feminist expression is characterized by "the conscious mystification of social divisions between women" (4), which asserts that all women share a common lot of oppression. However, conceiving of this collective lot does not preclude the presence of the competitive, atomistic ideology of liberal individualism that has hitherto dominated North American feminist discourse (Eisenstein 1981). The exclusive focus on gender, foregrounded by a liberal individualist ideology that naturalizes class inequalities, has left liberal feminism especially susceptible to cooptation. The ongoing pattern of usurpation of the feminist cause by bourgeois women to support their class interests is a case in point. To remedy these shortcomings, hooks (2015) calls for adopting a "politics of location" (15) as a radical standpoint from which counter-hegemonic feminist scholarship can be produced. The politics of location emerges in contrast to identity-based frameworks that have traditionally defined oppression according to a single-axis, flattened, and disintegrated understanding of social reality, resulting in atomized and fragmented forms of resistance. Stuart Hall (1985) similarly speaks of a politics of "articulation," meaning:

a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections—re-articulations—being forged (113–114).

Hall's call for "rearticulation" and his emphasis on the linkages as not necessarily "given" or fixed realities requires looking into the specificities of particular articulations, paying attention to both the conditions of their existence as well as the practices/processes (discursive and material) through which these articulations are created and sustained. For hooks (2015), rearticulation is intricately linked to the location from which marginalized voices emerge, defining marginality not as the site of deprivation, but of radical possibility and resistance. hooks' politics of location thus compels us to revisit, or rather rearticulate, the "common lot" of gendered oppression by grounding it in the lived experiences of marginalized women. The following analysis section attempts such intersectional rearticulation in the Iranian context.

4. Analysis

4.1. *The Rock: Gender and Sexuality in Ethno-Nationalist Movements*

For the informants, navigating the space of political activism as ethno-national-minority feminists proves challenging on multiple fronts. Informants all attested to the presence, and at times dominance, of masculinist and patriarchal forces within their respective ethno-nationalist movements. Sara, a Kurdish feminist activist and author, is critical of the under-representation of Kurdish women in official political parties, despite their widespread political contribution and radical forms of activism:

I think there is a misconception about Kurdish women that because of our traditional ways of dressing and the fact that we wore headwraps instead of traditional hijab, or because of our Kurdish dance, we are somehow more liberated than other women. The reality is that the same patriarchal mechanisms are working against Kurdish women as much as anywhere else. Even as we have the Jin, Jiyan, Azadi slogan, and we have Kurdish women guerillas and peshmargas, we still don't see women's presence in Kurdish political parties and this is one of the serious critiques I have always held towards these parties. [...] I mean we have a lot of Kurdish women who are politically active but I rarely have seen any of them in high ranks, or be the spokesperson of the party for instance.

Rana (pseudonym), a Gilac feminist activist, observes similar mechanisms in the Gilac nationalist movement:

The atmosphere in the Gilac community is very male-dominant. Whenever you want to speak of the issues facing women, they say you want to attack our honor (aberoo). The term feminist itself is used as a slur. To call someone a feminist is an insult. [...] I think a lot of the times, ethno-national activists also end up resorting to regressive nationalism. Patriarchal and masculinist tendencies don't allow them to give space to women and queer people. Most of the conversations get limited to how and where our borders are drawn and what our flags look like. You see that they organize all-male panels, the topics and solutions are all problematic and they only want to hear the Gilac woman's voice when and how it suits them.

The workings of such patriarchal and masculinist tendencies, as outlined by Rana, thus become apparent in the limited space dedicated to women in politics as well as the side-lining of their gendered analyses. For Aylar, a Hazara queer-feminist born in Iran, sidelining and censorship are experienced at the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality. Problematizing the cis-heteronormativity of Afghan diasporic spaces, she contends:

The discussion about national identity is an extremely sensitive topic. Another [sensitive topic] is the issue of LGBT rights. This is considered a taboo in Afghanistan. I think it is considered a taboo anywhere but what we observe in the context of Afghanistan, and this is my personal experience and I don't want to compare it to other places, is that you can experience extreme forms of violence when you talk about it. I have experienced this time and again in Afghan spaces where I have been invited to a workshop and as soon as I said that I am a queer-feminist or an activist from the LGBT community, even among those who have not been living in Afghanistan for years and have been here (in Europe), I easily got censored and then blacklisted from those spaces and was never invited back.

As a result, women often find themselves caught in the double bind of supporting the ethno-nationalist cause, on the one hand, and voicing their own feminist demands, on the other.

4.2. *The Hard Place: Centralism, Hierarchization, and the Race–Religion Constellation in the Feminist Movement*

While all informants strongly identified as feminists and prioritized gender in their political analysis, they expressed mixed emotions when it came to discussing the mainstream feminist movement. For Zahra, an Afghan-Iranian feminist writer and researcher, the Iranian feminist movement comprises an important resource that has historically brought about advancements in the areas of feminist knowledge creation and political mobilization:

In the Iranian context we see that since the Constitutional period, and specifically in the past forty-something years, the widespread gendered oppression has resulted in the creation of circles and gatherings or collective efforts of some sort to create up-to-date feminist knowledge here and there. Or to get acquainted with concepts or worldviews or discourses such as critical feminist discourse which, unlike the neoliberal discourse, is not only concerned with getting a piece of the pie and this has also impacted public knowledge. That is why we see that the slogan of the ongoing uprising is ‘Woman, life, freedom’, which is a feminist slogan and, in my opinion, very avant-garde and transgressive.

While Zahra is cognizant of the important achievements on behalf of Iranian feminism, she problematizes the existence of paternalistic tendencies and inner hierarchies of power within the movement, particularly in relation to Afghan-Iranian feminists:

To be honest, I wholeheartedly feel that Persian-speaking Iranians in the center are invested in the same relations of power that we as migrants have to face in relation to white people here (in Europe). [...] Except for alternative and progressive feminist spaces and collectives, the issue of Afghanistan and the Afghan subject is always approached through a paternalistic lens. Every Afghan subject always carries the burden of a range of stereotypes and pre-judgements that come before them, and I certainly have seen this many times, in my personal, political, intellectual life. You end up getting categorized based on those perceptions and if you don’t get essentialized, you will ultimately be treated as an exception. [...] Because they look at you through that hierarchical lens. That nationalist and regressive lens that does not go beyond identity politics. The Afghan me and the Iranian you!

Here, Zahra speaks of the essentializations and stereotypes facing Afghan-Iranians in the movement, specifically, and in Iranian society, more broadly. Afghan-Iranians constitute the largest refugee community in Iran. While transnational regional migration is by no means a new phenomenon in the region, various waves of forced migration from Afghanistan to Iran have been witnessed since the Taliban’s rise to power in the 1990s. In 2015, nearly one million registered Afghan refugees resided in Iran, more than half of whom had been born in the country (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2015), and a further two million were estimated to be undocumented (Landau and Achiume 2017). The take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, following the US troops’ withdrawal, has further forced a new generation of Afghan migrants to seek refuge in Iran. Afghan-Iranians face myriad challenges in the country. Obtaining residence in Iran has grown increasingly difficult for Afghan refugees in the past two decades. Since 2003, the primary channel for Afghan refugees to obtain residence in Iran has been through a registration system that offers them a form of temporary protection, which has to be obtained periodically through re-registration for a fee. Registered Afghan refugees are further granted limited rights to employment and education while undocumented refugees are denied protection altogether (Crawley and Kaytaz 2022). This has resulted in widespread poverty among the Afghan-Iranian community. The lack of options for naturalization or obtaining non-precarious registration has further resulted in many turning to irregular and black market jobs, rendering Afghan-Iranians more susceptible to exploitation, workplace harassment, and discrimination. For Zahra, the stereotyping and othering of Afghan-Iranians are by-products of the decades-long marginalization and discrimination faced by the community:

These cliches are to a large extent due to the political history of the Afghan community residing in Iran that inadvertently has placed them at the lowest rank in the socio-political hierarchy and this has an impact. When you are from Afghanistan or from the Afghan-Iranian community you become, willingly or not, the representative for that community. Even if you do not subscribe to that identity-politic, you become categorized based on those life experiences and based on the historical-material processes that create the dichotomy of the haves and the have-nots.

Aylar, a Hazara queer-feminist, similarly speaks of having faced othering in the Iranian feminist movement:

I think Iranian activists and feminists haven't done enough in relation to the issues facing Afghans residing in Iran. It is forty years that we are talking of here. I am asking why, even in feminist circles, I am still othered. For instance, they say she is Aylar, a feminist from Afghanistan. This is while I was born in Iran and grew up there. My whole family lives there and I have had to pay a high price for my activism in Iran but even in the feminist discourse on Iranian ethno-nationals we as Afghans have no place.

Zahra and Aylar both share having been categorized as the ethno-national other in feminist circles in line with the nationalist discourse of the Iranian state. Zahra is critical of the identity politics that divide feminists into the dichotomous categories of us and them owing to their ethnic and religious backgrounds. As Aylar rightfully states, the discourse around who belongs and who does not belong in the movement is aligned with discriminatory immigration policies, which render even second- and third-generation Afghan-Iranians non-citizens susceptible to removal. Borders are thus discursively reproduced by Iranian feminists, just as they are materially constructed and policed by the Iranian state so as to keep the unwanted other from entering or passing through. Essentialization and othering are, however, not exclusive to the Afghan-Iranian community. Fariba, a Baluch feminist activist, similarly asserts:

I started getting a lot of questions from people around me, like why aren't we seeing women in Baluchistan? Isn't it because you (Baluch) people are fundamentalists that we don't see women in protests? We have always faced such allegations from Persian nationalists. Always been labeled as separatist. That we are inherently different, that we have weapons, we are smugglers. These stigmas have always existed and even though we have tried to defend ourselves against them, we have not been able to change them much in the long run. I get so angry and upset when people say that women are nowhere to be seen. Women have always been there. You just chose not to see us.

According to Fariba, stereotyping and othering have gone hand in hand with the invisibilization of Baluch women activists. The allegations of separatism and fundamentalism further derive from and feed into the historically rooted nationalist discourse that frames ethno-national political mobilization as a threat to territorial integrity. For Sara, territorial integrity is the keyword for ethno-national oppression in Iran. Underscoring the interconnectedness of patriarchal oppression and ethno-racial discrimination, she posits:

I think even among feminists we still see such power structures being reproduced. The same unequal structures that exist between men and women in the outside world or the same patriarchal power relations that we are fighting against still persist among feminists themselves because of the privileges they hold. Owing to the fact that she lives in the center of the country, the language she speaks, her religion, her monetary and educational privileges. These privileges give her power and this results in her fancying herself as the absolute authority. To me it is exactly like the patriarchy. Only what I say is right and you need to follow in my footsteps. She only accepts me and gives me space if I do not say something that

turns me into a security threat in her eyes. As soon as I say I want ethno-national autonomy in deciding my own future or I want to be able to access education in my own language, she prioritizes the national issues over gendered ones and labels me as separatist.

The reference to the prioritization of the nationalist cause over the gendered one (through invoking the highly securitized allegation of separatism) renders explicit the persistence of a single-axis analysis within the Iranian feminist movement, which does not account for how gendered and ethno-racial oppression mutually construct one another. Sara further expresses that she does not subscribe to a uniform Iranian feminist identity, since the unequal social locations and positionalities of feminists inform their divergent demands, placing them at different—and, at times, opposing—sides of the social justice struggle:

Our struggles don't look the same because our political demands are not the same. Maybe for a woman from Tehran, her biggest concern is compulsory hijab, is kissing her lover in the street and all these other things we have heard. But imagine for a Baluch woman that doesn't even have a birth certificate, lives in absolute poverty and doesn't have access to the most basic of rights, do you think her first demand is freedom to dress how she likes? Of course not. Or imagine someone is a Kurdish woman who is also Yarsan, this means there is zero chance of you ever getting hired in a governmental position. No way you can find work in the public sector. You may get harassed in the educational system. You will be forced to lie many times. There is no place for you.

For Sara, gendered discrimination does not happen in isolation from other markers such as ethnicity, religion, and class. The quote moreover points to the workings of the race–religion constellation in constructing ethno-national identities in contemporary Iran. Following [Topolski \(2018\)](#), the race–religion constellation refers to the practice of racial classification on the basis of religion, whereby the social construction and politicization of religion as a racialized and racializing category give way to new forms of racism and socio-political exclusion. In the context of modern Iran, the concept is useful, for instance, in understanding the dialectical construction of the national identity of the Shia Persian self against the backdrop of the non-Shia (or non-Muslim) ethno-racial other, and the latter's subsequent peripheralization, exclusion, or even prosecution (as has been the case with Baha'is post-revolution). In relation to this, Sara reframes the problem of ethno-religious discrimination in Iran as an inherently classed issue, emphasizing the material hardships facing Sunni-majority Baluch women or the Yarsan Kurdish community in accessing resources. Fariba similarly does not believe in the common lot of oppression facing all Iranian women. She speaks of multiple instances in which she has faced discrimination and micro-aggression in feminist events:

My sense is that I am not really desired unless there is something in it for them, so they can say look we also care about Baluch people. I have been invited to multiple gatherings and you sense this in how they give you less time and you are the last person who gets to speak, that you are there as backdrop. This is maybe a small thing, it is just a micro-aggression, but things like being interrupted while I speak. This hierarchy of power between the center and the periphery that determines who gets to speak first, and who goes last when everyone is tired and their attention span is lower. Or those of us who speak with an accent, how much harder we have to try to have our words and analysis be valued as scientific or useful.

The quote above shows that the experience of othering in feminist spaces is an embodied experience. Othering thus goes beyond discursive representations (or articulations) such as stereotypes and labels and is exercised corporeally through micro-aggressions such as frequent interruption, unequal time allocation, and even shunning. Othering further does not necessitate complete exclusion. Rather, it is through tokenistic and conditional inclusion that minority women are often made to feel inferior. Zahra characterizes the

conditional inclusion of ethno-national women into mainstream feminist spaces as an opportunistic act that does not stem from an intersectional praxis:

We, as forward-looking feminist movements, have still not fully grasped or internalized the fact that our salvation only lies in joining forces with the progressive transnational trans-nationalist movements at the regional scale or we have yet to materially grasp this. Because I still believe that even among us women, we are still looking to benefit from the dominant order, no matter how meagre or conditional the benefits may be. [...] we still think that we are bestowing a privilege upon an Afghan-Iranian or an Afghan feminist when we invite them to our spaces. We do not look at it as a necessary feminist principle. We have reached this in certain circles and spaces but even in those spaces there are still glass ceilings and our agencies are limited. There are frameworks that prevent you from being easily accepted or your knowledge or even lived experiences, your ideas, your motives are not welcomed. You get placed at that margin. In that situation.

Zahra speaks of the margin not as a fixed geographic entity but rather as a social location that is temporally reproduced and bodily experienced. Sara similarly highlights the processes and practices through which marginality, as an articulation as opposed to a fixed reality, is reproduced in relation to ethno-national-minority feminists:

To me the margin is not a geographic location. It is true that we have cities that are definitionally placed at the margin, that are border towns but I am talking about the margin as a place that I, as a feminist Kurd, get exiled to even as I sit here in Europe in the year 2023. I still get put in that place, my 'rightful' place, by mainstream feminists from the center. How? By not giving me space, by not seeing me and intentionally ignoring me.

Referring to the margin as her rightful place, Sara proposes an alternative articulation of the margin, not only in relation to privilege but also to politics. Contextualizing the processes of marginalization and cooptation within the movement in the ongoing Jina uprising, she contends:

To me, even the translation of the Kurdish slogan of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" to Farsi is an effort towards appropriation. The fact that they keep repeating the name Mahsa and refusing to call her by the name that she herself preferred. The mainstream feminist movement in the center really tried to appropriate and coopt this uprising for its own gains but we have all seen that this movement started from the margins. So, the margin to me is a place of hardship but also a place of resistance and radical activism. It means that while the margin disempowers you, all that oppression and suffering gets piled up and someday somewhere a radical act comes out of it, like what we saw with women from Saqqez or with Baluch women. Something that none of us expected. No one did.

Here, Sara proposes a new understanding of the margin, transformed from a space of passive victimization to a place of agentic resistance and of radical possibility. Underscoring the role of materially and discursively disadvantaged women in spearheading the current uprising, she rearticulates the meaning of marginality in line with hooks' politics of location. Zahra believes that it is in this very rearticulation that possibilities for solidarity-making and intersectional mobilization lie:

I think the atmosphere is especially ripe for us to listen to and learn from one another, beyond all these pre-conceptions and prejudices. To listen to one-another with trust. I think the crisis of trust is a big issue among us. Because we as women have always been kept at an arm's distance from political resources and therefore have less experiences with collectivizing and independent organization. And still, existing agendas and structural realities continue to divide us and we shouldn't ignore this. These pose challenges and can be decisive on the ground. I think

we need time. Time to practice in our own feminist circles. I am optimistic and I think this time we can, in the aftermath of the Jina revolution, grasp the urgency of transnational mobilization and coalition-building at the regional level and look at it not as a possibility, not as a mere idea, but a necessity.

For Zahra, feminist organization thus transcends identity politics. While she is adamant that discursively reproduced identities are also grounded in material realities of inequality, she does not seek salvation in reproducing the discourse of patriarchal nationalism that dominates many of the existing modes of ethno-nationalist political organization. Rather, underscoring the urgency of coalition-building at the transnational scale, she envisions a hopeful future for feminist solidarity-building in the region, one that takes account of social divisions, transgresses mental and material borders, and remains radically committed to the politics of location.

5. Conclusions

The present article has made an attempt towards documenting and theorizing the intersectionality of the challenges (as well as opportunities) facing Iranian feminist activists belonging to various ethnic nations and religious beliefs. Drawing on co-ethnographic research, consisting of participant observations and qualitative semi-structured interviews with six protagonists from minoritized ethnic and religious backgrounds, it has shown that minority feminists find themselves between a rock and a hard place: the rock being masculinist politics within minoritized communities, which prioritize ethno-nationalist demands over gendered ones; the hard place being a centralist liberal feminist movement that fails to reflect the intersectionality of their experiences as non-Persian non-Shia women, reproducing hierarchies of power in relation to ethnicity, religion, and class. The informants, therefore, frequently found themselves caught between the conflicting necessities of supporting the ethno-nationalist cause and organizing around gendered demands. The dominance of patriarchal relations is evident in how women are underrepresented in political parties, especially in positions of leadership and decision-making. This underrepresentation further goes hand in hand with the sidelining of feminist analyses and the trivialization of gendered concerns. In some ethno-nationalist spaces, this goes so far as to render the term feminist a “slur,” carrying a strong negative connotation.

Likewise, in feminist spaces, informants often faced stereotypes, labeling, and hierarchization. The invocation of the historical trope of separatism was a commonly observed strategy to downplay the impact of ethno-religious discrimination, particularly in relation to Baluch and Kurdish feminists. Afghan-Iranian feminists, on the other hand, faced a seemingly opposite strategy of always being deemed the ethno-national other and a threat to national unity and uniformity. The analysis further showed how othering is a discursively reproduced yet embodied experience, with factors such as accent and ways of dressing (e.g., traditional clothing) playing a role in how non-Persian women are treated in feminist spaces. Frequent interruptions, unequal allocation of time, and preferential treatment were among the micro-aggressions most commonly experienced by informants. Next to othering, invisibilization, appropriation, tokenism, and conditional acceptance were problematized as strategies used to mystify social divisions among feminists and to perpetuate the hierarchical divide between the center and the margin.

Earlier in this article, I stressed how intersectionality remains a vastly underutilized tool in analyzing the experiences of the women of the Two-Thirds World, especially in non-Western contexts. While documenting the challenges experienced by marginalized women remains a timely and urgent task, the present work has aimed to go beyond merely empiricizing the rock and the hard place. By centralizing the voices and experiences of feminists from the margin, and echoing bell hooks’ prophetic call for a feminist politics of location, this article contributes to a situated rearticulation of the margin not as a place of destitution but as one of agentic resistance. To rearticulate the margin is not to romanticize it in a way that euphemizes the realities of rampant inequality and material hardship facing women in every corner of the world. Rather, it is an attempt at reclamation: of the

margin beyond victimhood, of feminism beyond imposed sisterhood, and of liberation beyond borders.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to my informants for their time, generosity and patience in sharing their experiences and insights with me for the purpose of this study. I am further thankful to the editors of this special issue, Patricia Schor and Luis Manuel Hernandez Aguilar, as well as the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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