

# COMPULSORY VEIL IN IRAN: A SOCIAL JUSTICE PROBLEM

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**Abstract:** *This paper looks into different aspects of compulsory veil in post-revolutionary Iran and discusses this discriminatory and exclusionary law as a social justice problem. The paper also demonstrates and brings into the light a number of consequences related to implementation of compulsory hijab in Iranian society that has led to gender-based violence targeting women.*

**Key words:** *Compulsory Hijab, violence, Iran, women, Islamic Revolution.*

## 1. Introduction

1979 Islamic revolution opened a new chapter in Iranian citizens' life. Lewy Guenter States that 1979 Islamic Revolution was highly related to religion, it was "a cultural institution, a complex of symbols, articles of faith, and practices adhered to by a group of believers that are related to, and commonly invoke the aid of, superhuman powers and provide answers to questions of ultimate meaning" (Guenter, 1974: 4). There are many debates on whether Iranian revolution was a political revolution or a religious revolution. According to Asher Brandis, 1979 Islamic revolution was a "popularly supported revolution" that was a consequence of widespread "socioeconomic" disagreements in the society (Brandis, 2009: 47). Asher further argues that "Despite the socioeconomic background of the Iranian Revolution, much of the ideological justification was routed through Shi'ism, which was brilliantly espoused by the ideological mastermind of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini." (Ibidem)

A few months after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered a compulsory veil (Mouri, 2018) and introduced many new rules to be implemented on all aspects of Iranian women's lives and body. In her book "The Veil Unveiled", Faegheh Shirazi articulates that there were rules on the jobs that women could take and also specific subjects they could study, they had to get their husband's permission to be able to work. (Shirazi, 2003: 92) women were encouraged to have a big family and their "sexual abstinence was declared a sufficient reason for divorce". (Esfandiari, 1997: 4)

In 1983, the Iranian government added a correction to the constitution of Iran which states that those women who damage public purity by appearing without hijab will be subjected to receive up to 74 lashes. (Addendum I.2, 1983:

17) Another correction also was added to the constitution saying that those who wear makeup and violate the dress code are in violation of religious law and they spread corruption, these people will be arrested and will be sentenced to one of the punishments listed in the addendum. (Addendum 4, 1986)

Shirazi states that “the criminalization of offending public chastity by not veiling properly coincided with Iran’s mobilization in 1980 for war against Iraq”, (Shirazi, 2003: 94) and later she explains “while up until 1980 the veil was exploit to distinguish the Muslim woman from the “Western” doll, during the war with Iraq, the veil was used to distinguish the Shi’i from the Sunni Muslim”. (Ibidem) Women’s bodies were used and controlled as a weapon of war by the ideology of hijab and an ideal woman was introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran and the image of veiled women was the depiction women as the “strong supporters of the war”. (Ibidem: 96)<sup>1</sup>

Shirin Ebadi is an Iranian human rights activists who received Noble Peace Prize. In her speech in Stockholm while receiving the prize she articulated that "Inside Iran, a woman is required by law to wear the hijab so I wear it. However, as I mentioned, I believe that with a more progressive interpretation of Islam we can change this. I believe that it is up to individual women to decide whether they want to wear the hijab or not". ("The Nobel Peace Prize for 2003 - SHIRIN EBADI." CAFRA: 15) In her speech, Ebadi insisted that Iranian government interprets Islam in a different way and Islam itself is not a violator of human rights. Muslim and non-Muslim women in Iran believe that they are wise enough to understand and also decide whether they want to wear a Hijab or not. Therefore, I argue that imposing a certain dress code on Iranian women by the clerics is a violation of human rights because it restricts Muslim and non-Muslim Iranian women to have control over their own bodies and have freedom of wearing. The majority of Muslim women in Iran are no longer interested in wearing hijab and they believe that they can be a Muslim and practice the Islamic rituals without being limited to hijab.

Although the war is over almost 29 years ago, there has been no change in Islamic Republic’s rules concerning the dress code. Women’s bodies, their freedom of choice and their right to clothing have been misused and violated to guard the revolution and maintain the ruling government in power. Hijab and the Iranian politics are extremely interlocked and interconnected and has been forcibly imposed on Iranian women to maintain men in power. Khomeini promised a lot in terms of increasing women’s rights but women’s rights was

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<sup>1</sup> After the revolution, the pictures of humans couldn’t be used on the boards or posters, but there ae graphic works that depicts war and the religious subjects produced by graphic artists for the government. See *A Decade with the Graphists of the Islamic Revolution, 1979-1989*.

more violated after the revolution. Women lost their jobs even those women who were highly educated had to remain at home. Women judges could no longer work in their positions. Iranian women's bodies were also used as a weapon of colonization and after the Islamic republic as a weapon of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements of clerics. Moreover, Iranian women were always forced to show their loyalty to the nation through "showing their distance from imperialist foreigners", therefore, "dare to fight the patriarchal "insiders" and demand women's rights". (Tohidi, 2016: 78).

## **2. Women's Resistance against Compulsory Hijab**

The issue of "Islamic Hijab" is becoming more diverse and global as the women from different Middle Eastern countries mostly from Muslim majorities come on the negotiation table together.

Masih Alinejad who is a New York based Iranian-American journalist and is well-known for her campaign against compulsory hijab in Iran and Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American political activist and a co-chair of 2017 Women's March both criticize the mandatory hijab in Iran as well as the orientalist views that believe hijab is a form of oppression. (Scott, 2018) Nowadays, Iranian women with or without veil as well as other Muslim women from Islamic societies intervene by a different approach. For example Shahzia Sikander focuses on the "Western obsession with the veil – while retaining the veiled woman as a silenced and voiceless subject" but the rest of her work also concentrates on questioning the tradition and its elimination of women's voices. (Zakaria, 2017: 82-83) Sikandar's arguments have challenged local and national patriarchies and their historical silencing and removing women from the history as well as the orientalist perspectives and stereotypes that again depicts eastern and especially women from Muslim countries as "voiceless". (Ibidem)

Similarly, in her book "Veil", Rafia Zakaria describes Shirin Neshat's photographs from "Women of Allah" series as "the strongest". (Ibidem: 84) she states "in these portraits, the faces, eyes and the hands of the artist and other female subjects are transcribed with Persian poetry". (Ibidem) According to Zakaria "In Neshat's representation of ideas of segregation and militarization, guns and veils come together to represent the twin dangers a woman can pose, one of a palpable if veiled sexuality and the other of the literal bullet in the barrel". (Ibidem: 85)



**Fig.1.** “Shirin Neshat, *Faceless*, Women of Allah series, 1994, B&W RC print & ink, photo by Cynthia Preston ©Shirin Neshat (courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussel)” (Neshat, 1994)

Shirin Neshat’s series “*Women of Allah*” indicate the convolutions and complication of women’s identities in the Middle East through a western and orientalist representation of Muslim women. Zakaria states that the Islamist veiled and armed woman-warrior model is concentrated on “complementarity” instead of “equality”, so it visualizes the domains of men and women as detached but saturated with their own “power structures” in which women can escalate to “leadership”. (Zakaria, 2017)



**Fig.2.** “Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness (Women of Allah)*, 1994, ink on RC print, 46¼ x 37⅞ inches. ©SHIRIN NESHAT/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS”. (Neshat, 1994)

### **3. A Social Justice Problem?**

In her book, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, Farzaneh Milani raises a question “ Has the veil protected Iranian women, or on the contrary, has it been so restrictive that women never became enough of a threat to call for such large-scale punishments and radical countermeasures?” (Milani, 1992: 9) In response, she argues that “maybe muteness has been their mutilation, not a physical amputation but a verbal one. Perhaps the post-revolutionary large-scale attempt by the government to re-veil women is a reaction to gains in power by a previously submissive group, a realization that many women have taken off their veils and many more might.” (Ibidem)

The Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi too argues on the call for hijab must be “looked at in the light of the painful but necessary and prodigious reshuffling of identity that Muslims are going through in these often confusing but always fascinating times.” (Mernissi, 1987) In order to examine whether compulsory hijab is a social justice problem in Iran or not, I look into the violation of women’s rights by the Iranian government, such as violation of right to work and violation of right to education, physical and psychological assaults of female students, prohibition of entering to public spaces, violation of rights to medical spaces and care, psychological security of female citizens, incarceration of women who fail to cover and observe Islamic hijab as well as punishments and penalties.

Through this examination, I argue that how compulsory hijab has appeared as a violence against women in post-revolutionary Iran and will indicate the absence of a gender social justice framework in social justice organizing in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **4. Hijab or Exclusion?**

One of the most important negative aspects of compulsory hijab in Iran is exclusion of women without a proper Islamic hijab, without a proper compulsory veil which is an ideological model and method of governance in Iran. In the early years of post-revolutionary era, women who chose not to wear hijab or those who did not completely cover their hair as described by Sharia law, were not allowed to enter governmental spaces or use the governmental facilities and then veil became compulsory in 1984 and those women who rejected this compulsory law were sentenced 70 lashes according to Islamic Republic’s rules and regulations on dress code. (<http://dw.de/p/GpKe>)

In 2006, a university official at the University of Tehran announced that they have dismissed some of the female students from the university and also

stated that the university have warned the students as well as their families before dismissal and described other female students who appear like “fashion models” at the university campus, almost 350 female students. (www.justiceforiran.com) In March 2011, almost twenty students were expelled for an academic semester because of rejecting the Islamic dress code. (Report by Tahkim Vahdat’s women’s committee 57 on “violence against female students”, 2012)

A huge number of female students were suspended or were under pressure for their rejection of dress code since 1979 at Iranian schools and universities. In 2008, an Iranian newspaper announced that “eight females students at the Technical University in Shiraz who were banned from education for an entire term because of improper hijab.” University and school sanctions are not restricted to those who do not wear a proper hijab but also “In cases where the university requires students to wear the chador, admission authorities have refused to allow students to register unless they wear the chador.” (www.justiceforiran.com) One of the common types of women’s harassment in Iranian schools is “summoning them to the disciplinary committee” at every institute and university, this committee “serves as a warning for even more serious consequences”. (Ibidem) Another penalty for violation of dress code is students’ suspension from university dormitories, for instance, in 2012, a woman was suspended from university dormitory because of having an improper hijab and within a month, fifteen female students were expelled from university residences at Shahr Kord University. (Report by Tahkim Vahdat’s women’s committee 57 on “violence against female students”, 2012) Moreover, reports show that a number of revolutionary guards known as “basij” harassed a number of female students and then tried to “justify” their attacks “in the name of proper hijab”. (Ibidem) This is a common practice at Iranian schools and university campuses. Instead of providing a safe and peaceful environment in educational spaces, they have turned these places into a place of horror and fear for women who themselves are the victims of domestic violence, street harassment as well as other types of political violence in Iran.”

## **5. Recommendations**

1. The international community should not close their eyes on women’s rights issues in Iran which is a violation of human rights. There are debates going on “Middle Eastern Feminism”, “Islamophobia” and “Orientalist Perspectives on Middle Eastern Women’s Rights” in the West, especially in North America. In these debates a lot of time and energy goes to condemning the western feminists for establishing war in the Middle East but the actual realities of women’s lives in the Middle East, especially on

Iranian women's lives goes unheard and forgotten. Moreover, there is a bias in these movements that stops and silences Iranian women's rights activists and their allies from all over the world who have fought for the rights of women worldwide.

2. Iranian government should stop recognizing women as second class citizens and stop using Islam as a tool to create "second class citizens" whose bodies and souls are controlled by clerics' interpretation of Islam.
3. Iranian government should not exclude women's politicians and change makers due to their hijab. When women find their position in the politics of Iran, they can be better agents of change. Women have a better understanding of women's lives, their concerns and struggles in a male-dominated and patriarchal society.
4. Iranian male politicians should understand the fact that Iranian women should have an equal space in power and decision making. Iranian women should be able to decide about their lives, their future and the future of their country by being allowed to have an active role and participation in decision making and leadership in Iran. Mandatory hijab should not be a barrier for excluding women who can bring a significant amount of change in their societies.
5. Iranian female politician in power, should fight for the stolen position of secular Iranian women who are excluded and marginalized from the political positions in Iranian government. Their words should not be in contradiction with women's rights and realities. They should be concerned about gender discrimination and restrictions to dress. They should strictly address and condemn these violations and also do not try to hide them from the world.
6. The Iranian regime should remove compulsory hijab rules from their legal system to promote equality and access for all women.

## **6. Conclusions**

Iranian feminists are fighting the same battleground just like other feminists are fighting for their human rights in the western societies. In pre-revolution and post-revolution era, they have used their different feminisms to challenge a patriarchal and religious society's unequal and discriminatory treatment of Iranian women as well as challenging the stereotypical understanding of the west on women's lives in Iran in different historical periods which had high stakes for them, from persecution to imprisonment, to abandonment, to governmental executions and honour killings to living a diasporic life in exile.

After almost forty years of Islamic government's strict rules on controlling and misusing women in Iran, they are still struggling in this

battlefield as a result of a tyrannical system of oppression existing in Iran. Compulsory veil and its important position in power relations between Iranian women and the government have remained as a symbol of government's resistant against Pahlavi regime without taking into consideration that women come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds in a diverse country like Iran. This ideological rule of governance has become a strict rule to have control over Iranian citizen's bodies and their appearance and roles in the society.

This compulsory law has reduced women's hope to live a life they want. Iranian women's struggles against mandatory hijab is not only a struggle against a piece of cloth but also a request for unifying Iranians to demand their social, religious and political rights as the citizens of an ancient civilization which its empire established the first world declaration of human rights 2500 years ago by Cyrus the great. This is a call for unifying all genders to demand their citizenship rights and call out a government's oppressive regulations and laws that has isolated a progressive nation.

This paper invites the readers to think about the ideological and political objectives of governments behind the compulsory hijab in Iran and critically engage with conversations and debates on dress code in this country. It also invites the reader to think about the question on why Iranian women look at the compulsory hijab as a source of oppression and what are the connections between oppressive regimes' rules of law and enforcement of mandatory veil and independence of women? What are the regimes of power which exclude and marginalize Iranian women using religious tools? How Iranian women's voice for freedom is buried in a national and international level?

How can a radical imagination support Iranian women in their struggles for liberty? Why Iranian women should have a freedom of dressing? Why silencing Iranian women is violence and a violation of human rights? What are the artistic and literary ways of resisting mandatory hijab?

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