UNRAVELLING THE NATION: DIGITAL CONTESTATIONS OF GENDERED NARRATIVES IN THE IRANIAN WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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The Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement was sparked by the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman detained in Tehran by Iran's morality police for "improper hijab" in September 2022. Protests quickly evolved into a broader challenge to state violence and systemic inequalities against gender, ethnic, and religious minorities in Iran. The uprising marked a historic shift in Iranian politics by centring gender dynamics and women's issues in public discourse, with scholars identifying it as a feminist and intersectional uprising (Shahrokni, 2022; Tohidi, 2023). Just as women's questions have historically been central in shaping political discourses in contemporary Iran (Najmabadi, 1993), they emerged as a key site of political contestation during the movement, particularly in digital spaces.

This nationwide movement mobilised millions of people across Iran while generating the country's biggest Twitter storm (Kermani, 2025). Despite severe state repression, activism has continued to emerge in hybrid and digital spaces, both inside Iran and within the diaspora, opening new spaces for demanding political transformation (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023) and imagining alternative political futures (Shamsi, 2023). However, the same digital platforms contributed to the re-emergence of nationalist sentiment, serving as spaces that various political forces have strategically leveraged to reinforce national identity and patriarchal narratives that often marginalise feminist and intersectional voices, through ascriptions of inauthenticity (Tafakori, 2025), positioning feminist demands as external to the nation.

Research Focus

In this context, my research examines how digital platforms have become battlegrounds where competing political forces, including government supporters and monarchists, struggle to shape narratives around women's issues and national identity throughout the movement. Within this contested digital space, women and feminist activists have played a crucial role in challenging dominant narratives and generating counter-narratives that

have reframed the movement's goals and impact. I look at how conflicting gendered narratives were constructed and contested on digital platforms during the protests, as activists sought legitimacy and visibility, appropriating mediation opportunities provided by digital media (Cammaerts, 2014, 2012). I am particularly interested in how feminist activists employed the affordances of digital media to navigate and disrupt patriarchal nationalist narratives during the uprising.

This study draws on an archive of digital textual and visual content from digital media platforms, particularly Instagram and Twitter, collected during the WLF and its aftermath (2022-2025). Employing a multi-sited mobile ethnographic approach (Postill and Pink, 2012), I tracked relevant narratives and discussions across platforms. I adopted frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Snow, 2004) to examine how different political actors strategically constructed competing gendered narratives to legitimise their positions and reshape meanings of women's political agency.

Competing Narratives of Gender and Nation

The analysis shows pro-government forces and monarchists strategically deployed gendered narratives in digital spaces. Both tried to instrumentalise women's issues using nationalist rhetoric to legitimise their own political agendas, either opposing or supporting the movement. The pro-government digital narrative framed the WLF movement within a national security paradigm, portraying women's rights demands as Western-orchestrated threats to Iran's integrity. Government supporters deployed moral discrediting strategies—accusing protesters of "betraying the nation," promoting "nudity," and labeling the movement a "prostitutes' revolution" (enqelab-e Favahesh), while attempting to redefine national identity and determine who belongs to "the Iranian people." This discourse constructed a binary between "veiled sisters" (Moallem, 2005) portrayed as guardians of national progress through embodiment of biopolitical policies and Islamic values, and "Westernized women" delegitimised as pursuing superficial rights, symbolically contrasted with mothers who bore martyrs protecting the homeland. Pro-government framing positioned Islamic fundamentalism as the foundation of a distinct non-Western/non-Eastern model of gender relations and nationalist ideology.

Monarchist forces, supporting the return of Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah's son, constructed a complex nationalist narrative during the movement through their digital practices and content, portraying Mahsa, avoiding her Kurdish name 'Jina', as the daughter of the nation and symbol of wounded motherland (Najmabadi, 2005). Building on Pahlavi-era nostalgia as a golden age of women's rights, they created a narrative that supports women's resistance within specific boundaries while promoting masculine slogans such as "Men, Homeland, Renovation"—a patriarchal counterpart to Woman, Life, Freedom. They framed women's rights within their broader secularization and modernization agenda, exemplifying "femonationalism" (Farris, 2017), where right-wing forces instrumentalize women's rights to serve their political agendas. The Monarchist strategy operated through selective legitimization of diaspora-based right-wing feminists aligned with Pahlavi, effectively narrowing the scope of feminist resistance and political imagination. This co-optation mechanism used the language of women's liberation while reinforcing existing power structures and excluding marginalized voices.

In response, feminist activists, particularly from marginalized regions such as Baluchestan and Kurdistan, employed digital affordances to develop intersectional counter-narratives that challenged both nationalist discourses and mainstream feminism within Iran and the diaspora. Continuing a historical pattern of women's struggles to keep gender issues central to sociopolitical movements, these activists framed Jina's death as a symbol of multiple, overlapping forms of oppression. Particularly through visual narratives, feminist counter-voices challenged traditional representations of women in nationalist narratives, introducing new dynamics around women's relationship to nationhood. These counter-narratives reimagined women not as victims or symbolic daughters and mothers of the nation but as active political subjects practicing cross-ethnic and transnational solidarity beyond traditional nationalist frameworks, effectively advocating for a more inclusive understanding of women's struggles and expanding the scope of feminist resistance and political imagination.

Discussion: Digital Platforms as Contested Terrain

This study demonstrates the complex struggle over the meaning of women's participation in Iran's political movements and society. What began as a contestation over gender equality has evolved into a broader struggle over definitions of the contours of national identity and Iran's future. Feminist activists have taken significant steps towards redefining Iranian identity by challenging patriarchal nationalist narratives and advocating for more inclusive visions of national identity and women's political agency. Through their digital practices, feminist activists work to redefine the concept of 'Iranianness' itself, challenging women's historical exclusion from national belonging while connecting individual experiences of oppression to broader patterns of patriarchal power in Iranian society. Within this contentious terrain, digital platforms in the Iranian context have emerged as contested and paradoxical spaces, simultaneously enabling political mobilisation and reinforcing nationalist framing as a mechanism of discursive control. This research highlights the nuanced interplay between digital activism, gender politics, and nationalism, contributing to broader debates on the role of digital media in shaping contemporary political struggles.

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