

November 2022

## Presence-as-Resistance: Feminist Activism and the Politics of Social Contestation in Iran

Navid Pourmokhtari  
*University of Alberta*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Pourmokhtari, Navid (2022) "Presence-as-Resistance: Feminist Activism and the Politics of Social Contestation in Iran," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 7, Article 2.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss7/2>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## Presence-as-Resistance: Feminist Activism and the Politics of Social Contestation in Iran

By Navid Pourmokhtari<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Using a Foucauldian perspective on power and resistance, this paper traces the history of oppositional movements founded by Iranian women to bring about fundamental social and political change during President Mohammad Khatami's second administration (2001-2005). Denied the political rights, freedoms and opportunities available to oppositional groups operating in Western democratic countries, these feminist movements adopted a radically new strategy for winning social and political rights grounded in an everyday politics of social negation and social subversion of the status quo played out in urban public spaces. Referred to here as "presence-as-resistance," this strategy constituted an everyday mode of opposition involving the performance in public spaces of those life practices—singing, bicycling, participating in sports, etc.—that are normatively and governmentally reserved for the private sphere of the home and/or gender-segregated spaces. My purpose here lies in showing how these modes of resistance worked to compel the authorities to relax their iron grip on women in Iranian society.

*Keywords:* Iran; Women's Movements; Protest Movements; Iranian Feminism; Resistance; Solidarity; Middle East and North Africa; Women's One Million Signature Campaign; Iranian Women

### Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), oppositional movements emerge in settings where control of the political channels for effecting meaningful change is monopolized by conservative factions determined to preserve the status quo at almost any cost. As a matter of course, such movements are denied the political rights, freedoms, and opportunities available to their counterparts in Western democratic countries: the right of assembly, of lobbying and petitioning the government, and of freedom of expression. Such constraints have led oppositional movements, in particular the feminist movements among them, within MENA to adopt an everyday politics of negation and subversion played out in public spaces as an alternative approach to securing social and political rights.

While some MENA states possess distinctive societal/structural features and modes of governance, one can discern common approaches to dealing with oppositional movements that constitute what might be called the "art of repression." As I have shown elsewhere (Pourmokhtari, 2021), the latter consists of shrewd calculations, refined skills and practical

---

<sup>1</sup> Navid Pourmokhtari holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Alberta. His research interests lie in the areas of international relations and comparative politics, revolutionary movements, international peace and security studies, and feminist studies. His most recent publications have appeared in *Third World Quarterly*, *International Sociology*, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, *Against the Current*, *Jadaliyya*, *Sociology of Islam*, *Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis* and *Foucault Studies*. Mr. Pourmokhtari is the author of *Iran's Green Movement: Everyday Resistance, Political Contestation and Social Mobilization* (2021), published by Routledge.

know-how, macro and micro-techniques and nuanced measures, an intuitive grasp of the psychology of fear, and paramilitary forces determined to silence dissenting voices in the name of perpetuating the status quo.

Confronted by so formidable an “art form,” oppositional actors invariably turn to less dramatic, and hence less risky, modes of collective action, except in those cases where they are grounded in ordinary life practices—what Nancy Fraser calls the “politics of everyday life” (1989, p. 18), or what might also be called a “spatial politics,” whereby governmental power is contested within the sphere of public spaces (Pourmokhtari, 2017). As the name implies, a spatial politics is conducted in urban public spaces because in MENA the latter is traditionally viewed to be the locus of opposition to state rule. Nowhere was this more evident than in Iran where women’s groups with feminist agendas came to play a leading role in challenging the Ayatollahs’ rule (Ardalan and Ahmadi Khorasani, 2003; Ebadi, 2016; Moghisi, 2011; Pourmokhtari, 2021; Rivetti, 2020). For this reason, and owing to space and time restraints, I shall use the events transpiring in Iran as a case study.

My aim here is to trace the history of political opposition on the part of women’s/feminist groups operating in Iran, focusing on everyday modes of public activism aimed at bringing about fundamental social and political change during President Mohammad Khatami’s second administration (2001-2005). As will be seen, because they are denied the political rights, freedoms, and opportunities available to oppositional groups operating in Western democratic countries, these groups adopted an everyday politics of negation and subversion as an alternative strategy for pursuing social and political rights. Embracing the politics of everyday life, they succeeded in bringing to bear a counter-power against the authoritarian rule of the Islamic Republic and, in so doing, created the foundation for a new mode of political thought and action directed at claiming civil rights.

Their principal strategy for resisting, subverting, and negating state power is examined here under the rubric of “presence-as-resistance,” by which I mean an everyday mode of opposition—one public and therefore visible for all to see—on the part of subordinated and marginalized women that involves *making* their *presence* felt by *performing* in *public spaces* the everyday life practices—singing, performing music, bicycling, participating in sports, etc.—that are normatively and governmentally reserved for men or for the private sphere of the home. Presence-as-resistance and the everyday life practices that were its lifeblood contributed in no small measure to instilling among these women a sense of everyday solidarity, a solidarity reinforced by an awareness of common interests and objectives that would foster a new consciousness, indeed a new subjectivity, that would impel them to fight for gender equality and civil rights on a daily basis.

Presence-as-resistance operated on two interrelated levels. First, as a strategy of defiance, it worked to de-subordinate the subordinated, in this case women, by transforming them into agents committed to contesting the established order by making their presence felt in public spaces on an everyday basis. What amounted to a socially and politically conscious negation and subversion of official norms, codes, and rules was intended to undermine the efficacy of state power, predicated on the government’s ability to control bodies in urban public spaces, which for any government represents a *sine qua non*—and precisely because nothing is more crucial for the survival of the state than controlling the streets and other public domains.

At the same time, presence-as-resistance constitutes a mode of visibility that communicates to the authorities in no uncertain terms that we are here; we are active; we are alive. So bold and uncompromising a form of corporeal presentation on the part of the

disempowered would have the “consequential effect [of] mirror[ing], invert[ing], subvert[ing], [and] reproduce[ing] spaces of power and domination”—something possible only when enormous crowds engage in doing “similar, though contentious, things” (Bayat, 2013, p. 21). In this way, presence-as-resistance would enable and make visible, as will be shown, “an immense new field of possibility for resistance” (Nealon, 2008, pp. 107-108).

To take but one example, one of the principal ways Iranian women’s groups would operationalize presence-as-resistance lay in appropriating a practice traditionally the preserve of men in Iranian society: bicycling. Thus it was that on any given day, huge numbers of female cyclists might be seen riding through the parks, boulevards, streets and alleyways of major cities, their mere visibility an act of defiance (see, e.g., Green Path, 2010; The National, 2010; Shaya News, 2021). For the authorities, this was cause for great anxiety given that it constituted an affront to patriarchy, one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic. So it came to pass that this simple, everyday act would send shockwaves through the entire governmental system.

Prior to “request[ing] that law enforcement agencies deal with the law/code disobeyers,” Tehran’s Friday prayer leader and conservative heavyweight Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami commented on the propriety of women cycling in public spaces: “this is worrying news that women had been spotted cycling on the streets of the Iranian capital” (The National, 2010). Another high-ranking cleric, the Ayatollah Seyyed Abol-Hasan Mahdavi, pronounced that “women who engage in bicycling are in fact insulting God” (Shaya News, 2021). And Hojjat-el Eslam Ahmad Alam-el Hoda weighed in by predicting that “cycling of females would fuel the sexual instincts of the youth” (Mohabat News, 2020).

Official statistics notwithstanding, the number of female cyclists would grow so rapidly that, in September 2016, Iran’s Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a *fatwa*, i.e., a religious ruling, declaring the practice “unlawful” (Shia News, 2016). Despite this official censure, it is likely, judging by the innumerable photographs of women cyclists uploaded daily on social media (see, e.g., Alef News, 2019; Irna News, 2020; Shaya News, 2021), that their numbers continued to grow unabated, presenting the Islamic Republic with a double dilemma: on one hand, arresting and imprisoning scores of women cyclists on an everyday basis would enable Tehran to maintain control of the streets and other public domains, and in particular the great squares, that primary locus of revolution in MENA, but at the cost of turning public spaces into militarized zones, and thereby disrupting the flow of daily life—something no government could afford to do for any extended period of time without turning such spaces into military operational zones. At the same time, ignoring or even relaxing the rules and norms of public conduct would only lead to further demands for social and political change. To their credit, or perhaps instinct for survival, the authorities capitulated, and thus today it is commonplace to see legions of Iranian women riding bicycles in public spaces in defiance of the rules and norms of Tehran’s governmental system (Tabnak Javan, 2021; Independent Persian, 2019; Setare News, 2022; Shaya News, 2021).

Lastly, this paper draws on a Foucauldian account of power and resistance for its theoretical framework. As suggested by Foucault’s famous dictum “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978, 95), both phenomena exist in a state of flux and interaction, sometimes violent. If this be the case, then, as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, 42) asserts, “where there is resistance, there is power,” given that the former is “an essential fact of everyone’s everyday struggle with power” (Nealon, 2008, 111). Far from emerging in opposition to an institution or a group, resistance develops against certain effects of particular technologies or mentalities of power, almost all of which in turn effect immediate everyday life practices. As Foucault asserts

in the “Lives of Infamous Men”: “There was never a thought that there might be, in the everyday run of things, something like a secret to raise, that the inessential might be, in a certain way, important, until the blank gaze of power came to rest on these minuscule commotions” (2003, p. 289). It is apparent that, for Foucault, everyday life constitutes a site wherein the “body,” that chief “object and target of power,” is presented in its most visible and ubiquitous form (1995, p. 136). Using a Foucauldian approach, I examine the phenomenon of everyday resistance on the part of women’s oppositional groups in Iran. My purpose here lies in showing how such resistance worked to challenge the status quo, thereby compelling the authorities to relax their iron grip. And as will be seen, it was “ineluctably bound up with the historically and [politically] specific [governmental power] through which ... [it was] formed” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 29). After all, Amy Allen reminds us in her important *The Power of Feminist Theory*, the politics of counter-power and political resistance to the status quo affirm the social fact that everyday life constitutes a domain of power relations: “power [is] an unavoidable element of social life” (1999, p. 44).

### **A Foucauldian Account of Everyday Resistance in Public Spaces**

A vantage point for analyzing contention politics is discernible in Foucault’s writings on power, or more precisely governmental power, understood as “the way[s] in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed” (1982, p. 790). This “conduct of conduct,” then, is “a mode of action upon actions of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789), conditioned by the historically specific and localized exercise of power. However ubiquitous in terms of its operations, it is something more than a merely prohibitive relation, as Foucault explains:

[W]hat I mean by power relations is that we are in a strategic situation towards each other ... We are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump outside the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I’ve said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free. Well anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing (1996, p. 386).

That “power” is not some “unconquerable, absolute entity that one has to kneel before” (Foucault, cited in Afary and Anderson 2005, p.189) means “it creates new goals, new subjects, new streams of action, new types of knowledge [and new forms of resistance]” (Goodwin and Jasper, 2012, p. 5). The latter, moreover, are an integral aspect of power that embodies the possibility of defiance and disruption, subversion and rejection. Thus, for Foucault, power can enable ruptures and binary divisions among the conductors, i.e., those who govern by exercising modalities of power, and the conducted or governed. Resistance becomes a matter of saying no to power, which, for Saba Mahmood, “is formed within the limits of a historically specific set of formative practices and moral injunctions” (2005, p. 28).

Germane to the process of resistance is the role public spaces play in mediating how social and political conflicts emerge and develop. This is so because power, as Foucault asserts in his seminal *Society Must be Defended*, is primarily “used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies” in public domains by means of monitoring and controlling them (2003a, p. 241). Certainly, such spaces are crucial as loci for conducting “all forms of communal life”

(Foucault, as cited in Crampton and Elden, 2007, p. 5), and in particular for those who wish to “to be conducted [i.e., governed,] differently” (Death, 2010, p. 240). In this regard, what lends public spaces their significance is that while they have “increasingly becom[e] the domain of ... state power” (Bayat, 2013, p. 53), which “regulates their use [and] mak[es] them ‘orderly’” (Bayat, 2013, p. 53) through laws and regulations, they have also become, simultaneously and contingent on the will of a people, “[loci for] shaming the authorities” (Mirsepassi, 2010, p. ix). In this way, they constitute spaces of resistance, sites of political contestation and social negation of the status quo where everyday solidarity is continuously shaped, re-shaped, and solidified.

The use of public spaces as domains of counter-power is more likely to intersect with the politics of everyday life where open political channels simply do not exist; where political parties are non-existent and/or their function(s) rudimentary; and/or where oppositional groups are denied political rights, particularly where challenging government policy is concerned. It is under these circumstances that such groups might appropriate such spaces in order to voice their demands, in the process creating sites of social resistance and political defiance. To this end, one can speak of a kind of spatial politics or politics of space where power and resistance collide, which means that, ultimately, “government and dissent [,] are mutually constitutive” (Death, 2010, p. 240). This is so because public spaces can serve as alternative venues for political expression and debate in lieu of parliaments and legislative assemblies that, by virtue of being controlled by conservative elements, are severely handicapped in this regard.

How everyday life practices come to be politicized in public spaces, moreover, has to do with the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Foucault’s concept of power/power relations, wherein the latter are almost always resisted right “at the point of ... application” (May, 1993, p. 114), and nowhere more so than in the passing minutes of everyday life, notes Nancy Fraser in her ground-breaking *Unruly practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*:

Foucault enables us to understand power very broadly, and yet very finely, as anchored in the multiplicity of what he calls “micropractices,” the social practices that constitute everyday life in modern societies. This positive conception of power has the general but unmistakable implication of a call for [a] “politics of everyday life” (1989, p.18).

That power is articulated in a positive light is to be understood in relation to Foucault’s theorization of how individuals, that is to say bodies, operate vis-à-vis relations of power. According to him, power operates on the individual in two ways: first, they are subject to the constraints imposed by the social relations of power; second, and simultaneously, they may and can take up the position of a subject in and through those very constraints. This is what Foucault calls subjugation or subjection, a term denoting the co-constitutive nature of power and resistance: while one can conceive power as a heteronomous, multiple and expansive phenomenon, one can also speak of “a multiplicity of points of resistance” made possible through the disparate mechanisms of power at play in public spaces (1978, p. 95). All this connotes that power is not, again, “a foundational, unconquerable, absolute entity that one has to kneel before” (Foucault, cited in Afary and Anderson, 2005, p. 189). On the contrary, what Foucault wishes to emphasize is that individuals/bodies subjected to specific modalities of power are always seeking to “find out where are the weak points ..., from which [they] can attack it,” that is to say, resist it (Foucault, cited in Afary and Anderson, 2005, p. 189). This is so because

“the history of the governmental ratio,” i.e., its power, is inseparable from “the history of the [resistance] opposed to it” (Foucault, 2007, p. 357).

But what, one might ask, does the term “resistance” mean, and what does it entail? Following Foucault’s lead, one would say that it constitutes a contextually conditioned phenomenon intermeshed with the specific governmental power relations in which the subject is enmeshed, i.e., disciplined and socialized (1978; 1982). This means that resistance works to counteract the effects of an historically and geographically specific mode of power working to subordinate, marginalize, discipline, and control the individual in the context of their everyday life.

However far from constituting any or all acts of defiance, i.e., random, pointless or willy-nilly everyday acts, it is crucial to acknowledge that resistance entails specific ways of negating, challenging, undermining or rejecting state rule. Foucault argues in his seminal “What is Critique?” that resistance, and especially the everyday variety, entails the everyday art “of not being governed like that” (Foucault, 1996a, p. 384), i.e., through historically and geographically contingent modes of power, hence his injunction, “If we want to do an analysis of power, we must speak of powers and try to localize them in their historical and geographical specificity” (Foucault, 2012, para. 12).

In light of the foregoing discussion, a Foucauldian-inspired mode of resistance of an everyday kind consists of conscious, varied, and persistent forms of opposition to diverse technologies of power. It follows that while resistance or everyday resistance manifests the varied effects of specific spaces, technologies, rules, codes, and norms of power, it is ultimately an intentional act directed at “making fresh [and persistent] demands” upon the authorities and the governments they represent (Bayat, 2013, p. 44). This is so because it unfolds at that moment when we, as Foucault would say, begin to “stylize ourselves” in relation to certain modalities of power (Osborne, 1999), or when we recreate ourselves in a fashion that is no less than “a work of art,” practically and theoretically, and for one express end: to resist and/or contest specific modalities of power (Foucault, cited in McLaren, 2002, p. 70).

Assuredly, then, resistance does not simply oppose the exercise of power at every moment and at every point in every domain of social life. Rather, it comes into its own only when subjugated bodies are willing to confront power for the specific purpose of contesting and rejecting governance and/or governments and/or governmental power (Foucault, 1978; 1982). Structures and acts of resistance are contextually bound to certain forms of political conduct or rule, given that they “implicate[] the strategies, techniques and power relationships they oppose” (Death, 2010, p. 240). As will be shown, what I have referred to here as presence-as-resistance is no more, and crucially no less, than a historical and localized struggle, both against and enabled by, historically specific relations of state power.

### **Presence-as-Resistance: Iranian Women’s Groups and the Everyday Politics of Negation and Rejection**

On May 23, 1997 Mohammad Khatami was elected the fifth president of a post-revolutionary Iran. It was during this time that oppositional, feminist women’s groups began embracing a politics of everyday life, aimed at bringing about fundamental social and political change. In order to grasp the historical significance of this development, one need look no farther than the events that transpired in 2001.

In setting aside their ideological and political differences, women’s groups of all stripes—secular, nationalist, religious, leftist—coalesced in 2001 to pressure the administration

to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a United Nations initiative hailed by feminists as an international bill of rights for women. If adopted, CEDAW would have challenged a host of laws and practices that had long worked to marginalize and subordinate Iranian women. Following a press campaign conducted by feminists, the administration drafted, in December 2001, the requisite legislation and submitted it for ratification to a reformist-dominated parliament, the *Majlis*. However, immediately prior the final vote, the enabling bill was placed on hold owing, according to then speaker of the *Majlis* Mehdi Karoubi, to “concerns” on the part of conservative clerics serving in the judiciary and other areas of the administration, regarding its compatibility with *Shari’a* law (Tohidi, 2006). Prodded by activists, the reformist deputies demanded an official enquiry, over the course of the following two years, but to no avail. Finally, in August 2003, the Islamic Republic’s Guardian Council, the body responsible for approving legislation, announced that CEDAW would not be ratified (Feminist News, 2013).

This ruling would embolden conservative clerics and their supporters to mount a campaign aimed at discrediting, once and for all, those women who in their view had dared cross what they called the *red line*. It is this “crossing [of] the red line,” Mehrangiz Kar asserts in her seminal *Crossing the Red Line. The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran* (2006), that prompted the clerical elites to denounce the feminists and, by implication, their demands for equality—the *sine quo non* for the feminist cause—in public spaces and the media. Thus, for example, in the city of Rasht the Friday prayer leader, one Zein-el Abedin Ghorbani, took aim at all who “questioned religious authorit[y] on ... *Shari’a*,” warning them, and the women among them in particular, “not to cross the red line, not to dismiss the *Qur’an* and Islam” (cited in Bayat, 2007, p. 79). At the same time, women among the conservative establishment, most notably Monireh Noubakhat and Marzieh Dastjerdi, called for feminist debates in the press to be censored for “creat[ing] conflict between women and men” as well as undermining *Shari’a* and the fundamental principles of Islam (Bayat, 2007, p. 79).

These initiatives were followed by a government crackdown on the opposition press and other feminist-aligned print media that, coupled with existing legal loopholes allowing for gender discrimination, ensured the status quo would remain intact. However, rather than serving as a deterrent, this only politicized and enraged women further, thus empowering them to assert their counterpower. But unlike anything in the past, the latter would be predicated on everyday life practices played out in public spaces.

No longer able to advance a reformist agenda through official channels, women’s groups would adopt an unconventional mode of resistance by engaging in a spatial politics. It was this strategy that eroded the Islamic Republic’s governmental-patriarchal power, if not its entire modality of rule, which, in large measure, was contingent upon controlling bodies in public spaces. And so it came to pass that spatial domains—streets, squares, parks, alleyways, university campuses, and classrooms—were converted into venues where grievances might be aired, interests articulated, objectives delineated, demands made, and an everyday solidarity fostered, all with a view to contesting, negating, and subverting the political status quo.

For their part, the authorities, though backed by batteries of laws and regulations for controlling public spaces, in addition to formidable police and paramilitary forces, were reluctant to intervene to restore order, for to do so meant turning the streets into militarized zones, effectively disrupting the normal, everyday flow of life. Moreover, that the mode of activism confronting them was infused with ordinary life practices further complicated and made more unpalatable state intervention (Afary, 2001; Rostami-Povey and Povey, 2012).



Presence-as-resistance, along with the everyday life practices that were its lifeblood, assumed disparate forms. For example, women in unprecedented numbers began entering the universities where they acquired specialized knowledge in a broad range of academic fields, in the process building an everyday solidarity with their peers, both male and female (Mehran, 2009; Kurzman, 2008; Shavarini, 2005). This great influx into the halls of academe prompted the *Majlis* to release, in 2007, a report that found, among other things, that the proportion of female to male students admitted to universities had risen from 32% in 1983 to 65% by 2007 (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). The dramatic increase in the presence of women on campuses had the effect of nurturing subcultures of educated women whose members saw themselves as active agents working to undermine the political and social status quo (Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2011; Vakil, 2011). All this was, of course, an anathema for a conservative establishment that had set its sights on raising a post-revolutionary generation of publicly invisible, socially subservient, politically docile, and culturally backward housewives, mothers, sisters and daughters (Pourmokhtari, 2014; 2021).

Other like-minded women took up the arts or studied music, much to the consternation of a conservative establishment for whom such pursuits were tantamount to crossing yet another red line (see, e.g., Khabar Online, Osanloo, 2009). Conservatives were dismayed to discover so many women attending voice classes and so many others studying traditional Persian musical instruments, like the *tombak*, *taar*, *ney* and *santoor*, in addition to piano, guitar and other Western instruments, often taking advantage of classes open to the public (Ghazizadeh, 2011; Habibian, 1999; S. DeBano, 2005).

Still others took up sports, in particular rowing and cycling, which necessarily took them out of the private sphere of the home and into public spaces previously the domain of men, at one stroke eliminating a formidable barrier to gender equality (Rezaei, 2015; Peyghambarzadeh, 2016). Others simply appeared in the streets, making their presence felt by revealing heavily made-up faces and/or wearing brightly coloured *manteaus* (a kind of long overcoat) or diminutive *hijabs* from which spilled scandalous quantities of hair—creating a theatre of defiance on an everyday basis (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006), all an affront to the establishment's brand of Islam. By persistently transgressing the rules, norms, and codes for governing public conduct, hundreds of thousands of these “subjugated lionesses” would transform public spaces into domains of political resistance, in the process rejecting, defying, and subverting the status quo.

The purpose of these public displays, these modes of spatial politics—in and of themselves acts of empowerment, assertions of a collective will and expressions of everyday solidarity—lay in resisting, and by implication de-authenticating, a state system of control. Resistance of this kind could only be contained, if not crushed, by state violence applied on a scale that would disrupt the flow of daily life such that the entire system would be discredited. This was more than could be countenanced and further than the state was prepared to go. And so it came to pass that everyday resistance would continue to manifest itself in various forms of social and political contestation, and in the seminal 2006 Women's One Million Signature Campaign.

### **The 2006 Women's One Million Signature Campaign: The Everyday Politics of Social Contestation**

In the waning years of the Khatami administration, everyday resistance, along with the sense of everyday solidarity it fostered, would empower women's groups to launch, in August 2006, what came to be known as the Women's One Million Signature Campaign. The

campaign's objective lay in reforming all criminal, civil, and family law that discriminated against women. The proposed reforms included equal marital rights for women, e.g., the right to divorce spouses; the abolition of polygamy and temporary marriages; the right of women to pass their nationality onto their children; gender equality with respect to *dieh*, i.e., compensation for bodily injury or death at the hands of a spouse; equal inheritance rights; more stringent laws to deter honour killings; and equal weight given to testimony provided by women in courts of law (Peyghambarzadeh, 2015; Rezaei, 2015).

The campaign was organized by a group of 54 activists, including distinguished journalists, academics, and feminists of every political, secular, nationalist, and religious affiliation, among them such luminaries as Shirin Ebadi, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, Narges Mohammadi, Parvin Ardalan, Fakhrossadat Mohtashamipour, Esha Momeni, and Zhila Bani-Yaqoub. Additional activists were recruited through friendship networks, comprised mainly of urban youth (Abdi, 2015; Khorasani, 2010). To recruit campaign workers, the organizers sponsored workshops, first in Tehran and later in other Iranian cities, that would morph into loosely-coordinated cells where the workers were educated regarding women's rights and the legal issues pertaining to them (Khorasani, 2010).

What created among these disparate groups a sense of everyday solidarity, along with a willingness to engage in collective action, was, according to former campaign worker Ali Abdi (2015), the shared experience of government misrule and misconduct. What "united us," Abdi recalled, was the conviction "that the status quo [was] fundamentally unjust with regard to women" and that "collecting signatures constituted a pragmatic way of addressing the discriminatory laws against [them]." It was this deep-rooted sense of injustice that compelled Abdi and his fellow feminist campaigners to engage in collective action of an everyday kind, thus operationalizing presence-as-resistance as the principal strategy for contesting governmental power.

Presence-as-resistance constituted a localized mode of everyday opposition whereby women's groups could, by making themselves visible in public spaces, challenge, negate and subvert prevailing gender rules, norms, codes and taboos. A tactic much favoured by the campaigners involved engaging in discussion small groups of passersby with a view to raising awareness of patriarchal laws and their consequences, not only for women but for the whole of Iranian society (Abdi, 2015; Peyghambarzadeh, 2015; Rezaei, 2015). When the time was ripe, their interlocutors were encouraged to sign the petition. All this played out in the context of performing ordinary life practices—shopping, socializing, bicycling, picnicking, strolling along streets and boulevards—within urban public spaces.

At the same time, as a strategy of defiance, presence-as-resistance enabled a counter-politics by fostering among women's groups a new consciousness that impelled them to fight for gender equality. And once again, public urban spaces became the site of social and political contestation, wherein campaigners performed everyday acts of resistance. At times these resembled staged presentations. For example, in one especially popular skit, two activists, supposedly married to the same man, would engage in a heated argument, sometimes accompanied by mock fisticuffs, during which each revealed how a polygamous relationship had worked to undermine her rights and dignity and subjectivity, indeed authenticity, as a woman. Performed in public domains, this became the campaign's signature sketch (Abdi, 2015).

So realistically staged and thoroughly grounded in a spatial politics were these performances that they drew large crowds by way of fostering an everyday solidarity among women, at which point other activists would appear on the scene and proceeded to engage the

audience on the subject of legally sanctioned gender discrimination and the need for reform. Theirs proved to be an easy sell as the performances so precisely mirrored the reality of everyday life for so many women among the audiences.

It is apparent that, by engaging in a spatial politics, Iranian women succeeded in challenging state rule precisely at the point where power relations are so often applied. Moreover, by engaging in everyday kinds of resistances in such spaces, they consciously negated and rejected Tehran's governmental rule. These diverse and varied forms of opposition were, as Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson (2013) attest, "conditioned by the [specificities] of power that [in turn] determine[d] ... what to resist" (p. 27), in this case a polity wherein the entire "political process was gendered," according to Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999, p. 73).

These events would reach a climax early in 2008 when state security forces began a systematic crackdown, banning meetings and workshops, arresting activists and closing the campaign's website, recalled former activist Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh in an interview with the author. By the end of 2008, "over 50 members ha[d] been arrested ... while hundreds more ... had their passports revoked or ... been barred from the education system," thereby driving the campaign underground where it would languish (Tavaana, 2016, para. 19).

Though failing to garner the requisite number of signatures, the Women's One Million Signature Campaign may be viewed, according to Farhad Khosrokhavar, as "the most prominent feminist [initiative] in [post-revolutionary] Iran" (2012, p. 65), given that it employed everyday life practices in ways that worked "[to] effectively raise[] ordinary peoples' awareness of women's rights, promote[] the idea of societal equality, and publicize[] women's demands," such that the latter could no longer be ignored (Tavaana, 2016, para. 8). This was "negotiating patriarchy" at its best (Tohidi, 2006, p. 624).

By generating a public discourse on women's rights to which the authorities had to respond, Iranian feminists succeeded in coercing the authorities into responding, i.e., repealing, over the course of 2008, two patriarchal laws and replacing them with gender-neutral legislation. Specifically, women were granted the right to inherit a husband's property and to receive equal "blood money" in the event of an accident covered by an insurance company (Rezaei, 2015).

Presence-as-resistance enabled the Women's One Million Signature Campaign to challenge the gender discrimination embedded in a legal system informed by a state-sanctioned patriarchy, galvanizing them into reinventing themselves by opening up a new dimension in their social lives, in the process empowering a generation of subjugated women committed to asserting themselves on the political scene as citizens claiming civil rights.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown how, during Mohammad Khatami's second administration (2001-2005), feminists belonging to disparate Iranian women's groups succeeded in challenging the social and political status quo by conducting everyday life practices in urban public spaces. This strategy worked to transform such spaces into sites of social contestation where the politics of everyday life collided head-on with the rules, regulations, and norms of the dominant order. For the authorities to turn a blind eye to the challenge posed by presence-as-resistance would have been to risk losing their grip on power. This explains why the Islamic Republic drove the 2006 Women's One Million Signature Campaign underground where it would atrophy. Despite this reverse, however, the hegemonic frame did shift sufficiently to whet the appetite of the feminist groups for further social change, as evinced by amendments to the marital law providing for greater gender equality. More importantly for the future, the campaign would play a decisive role

in developing a new social and political consciousness among Iranian women, and particularly the feminists among them, who increasingly came to see themselves as politicized citizens of the first rank leading the Iranian opposition in an ongoing struggle against decades of clerical misrule.

In a MENA setting such as Iran where contentious politics plays out under the ever-watchful gaze of the state and its security apparatus, resistance on a mass scale constitutes a corporeal challenge to the status quo, i.e., to the laws, rules, codes and norms, as well as the values, attitudes, assumptions and knowledges that sustain state power, that make it appear natural, habitual, normal, inevitable, irresistible and, above all, legitimate. Yet, it is this very power that creates, according to Foucault, the conditions of possibility for resistance—a resistance that develops outside institutional structures, in the case of the women’s groups discussed here, in public spaces and in the passing minutes of everyday life. All this goes to show how a new consciousness, a new style of thinking, a new subjectivity, a new form of collective action, a new mode of feminist activism and a new sense of everyday solidarity bent on reclaiming civil rights might be brought to bear on even the most deeply entrenched of authoritarian elites with a view to contesting the legitimacy of their rule.

### List of Interviews

- Abdi, A. (2015). Interview with Ali Abdi, former member of the One Million Signature Campaign.
- Peyghambarzadeh, Z. (2015). Interview with Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh, former student activist, former member of the One Million Signature Campaign.
- Rezaei, S. (2015). Interview with Sabra Rezaei, former member of the One Million Signature Campaign.

### Farsi References

- Alef News. (2019). Aya docharkheh savarieh zanan jorm ast? Retrieved from <<https://www.alef.ir/news/3980228082.html>>.
- Green Path. (2010). Hokoumati ke az docharkhe savari-ye zanan negaraan ast az sambol shodan-e neda khab be cheshm nadarad. Retrieved from <<https://greenpath.wordpress.com/2010/08/06/>>.
- Independent Persian. (2019). Docharkheh savarieh zanan: aari ya na? Retrieved from <<https://www.independentpersian.com/node/17356/>>.
- Irna News. (2020). Aya docharkheh savarieh banoovan jorm ast? Retrieved from <<https://www.alef.ir/news/3980228082.html>>.
- Khabar Online. (2013). Aya khanandegiye zanan haram ast? Nazar-e ayatollah Khamenei va ayatollah makaarem. Retrieved from <<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/320418/culture/religion>>.
- Mohabat News. (2020). Alamolhoda: Docharkhesavarieh Dokhtaran, gharayeze jensieh javanan ra sholevar mikonad. Retrieved from <<https://mohabatnews.com/?p=39560>>.
- Setare News. (2022). Aya rahbari docharkheh savarieh banoovan ra jayez danesteand? Retrieved from <<https://setare.com/fa/news/10069/>>.
- Shaya News. (2021.) Namayandeye khobregan: docharkhesavarieh zanan, tohin be khodast.

Retrieved from <<https://shayanews.com/>>.

Shia News. (2016). Hokme docharkhe savarie banoovan az nazare ayatollah Khamenei.

Retrieved from <<http://www.shia-news.com/fa/news/126733/>>.

Tabnak Javan. (2021). Docharkheh Savarieh Banoovan, Mamnooiat ya mahdoodiat? Retrieved from <<https://tabnakjavan.com/fa/news/5208/>>.

## English References

Afary, J. (2009). *Sexual politics in modern Iran*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Afary, J., & K. B. Anderson (2005). *Foucault and the Iranian revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. The University of Chicago Press.

Allen, A. (1999). *The power of feminist theory: Domination, resistance, solidarity*. Westview Press.

Amir-Ebrahimi, M. (2006). Conquering enclosed public spaces. *Cities*, 23(6), 1-7.

Amir-Ebrahimi, M. (2008). Transgression in narration: The lives of Iranian women in cyberspace. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4(3), 89-118.

Ardalan, P., & Ahmadi Khorasani, N. (2003). *Senator: the work of senator Mehrangiz Manouchehri in the "Struggle for Legal Rights for Women" and "Reading Lolita in Tehran."* Tehran: Tose'eh.

Bahramitash, R., & Esfahani, S. (2011). *Veiled Employment: Islamism and the Political Economy of Women's Employment in Iran*. Syracuse University Press.

Bayat, A. (2007). *Making Islam democratic: Social movements and the post-Islamist turn*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Crampton, J. W., & Elden, S. (2007). *Space, knowledge, and power: Foucault and geography*. (Eds.). Burlington, USA: Ashgate.

Death, C. (2010). Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian analytics of protest. *Social Movement Studies*, 2(3), 235-251.

Ebadi, S. (2016). *Until we are free: My fight for human rights in Iran*. Random House.

Feminist News. (2013). CEDAW rejected in Iran. Retrieved from <<http://www.feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=7996>>.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8(4), 777-795

Foucault, M. (1996). *Foucault live: (interviews, 1961-1984)*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. (1996a). What is Critique? In J. Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*. (Ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, M. (2003). The lives of infamous men. In P. Rainbow & N. Rose, *The Essential Foucault*. (Eds.). New York: New Press

Foucault, M. (2003a). *Society must be defended*. New York: Picador.

Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, Michael Senellart. (Ed.). NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2012). The mesh of power. *Viewpoint Magazine*. Retrieved from: <<https://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/12/the-mesh-of-power/>>.

- Fraser, N. (1989). *Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ghazizadeh, S. (2011). Cultural Changes of Iranian Music after Islamic Revolution. 2011 *International Conference on Humanities, Society and Culture*, Singapore. Retrieved from <74-ICHSC2011-M20058.pdf (ipedr.com)>.
- Goodwin, J., & Jasper, M. J. (2012). *Contention in context: Political opportunities and the emergence of protest*. (Eds.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Habibian, M. (1999). Under Wrap or the Stage: Women in the Performing Arts in the Post-Revolutionary Iran. *CEMOTI*, no. 28, 295-311.
- Kar, M. (2006). *Crossing the Red Line. The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran*. Mazda Pub.
- Khorasani, N. (2010). *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story*. Women's Learning Partners.
- Khosrokhavar, F. (2012). The Green Movement in Iran: Democratization and secularization from below. In R. Jahanbegloo (Ed.). *Civil society and democracy in Iran*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Kurzman, C. (2008). A Feminist Generation in Iran? *Iranian Studies*, 41 (3): 297–321.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1999). *Islam and gender: The religious debate in contemporary Iran*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- May, T. (1993). *Between genealogy and epistemology: Psychology, politics and knowledge in the thought of Michel Foucault*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Mehran, G. (2009). “Doing And Undoing Gender”: Female Higher Education In The Islamic Republic Of Iran”. *International Review of Education*, no. 541.
- Moghisi, H. (2011). Islamic feminism revisited. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31(1).
- The National. (2010). Women cyclists face jail, warns Iranian police chief. Retrieved from <<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/women-cyclists-face-jail-warns-iranian-police-chief-1.522984> >.
- Nealon, J. (2008). *Foucault beyond Foucault: Power and its intensifications*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Osanloo, A. (2009). *The politics of women's rights in Iran*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Rostami-Povey, T., & Povey, E. (2012). *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*. Routledge.
- Pourmokhtari, N. (2014). Understanding Iran’s Green Movement as a ‘movement of movements.’ *Sociology of Islam*, 2(3), 144-177.
- Pourmokhtari, N. (2017). Protestation and mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa: A Foucauldian Model. *Foucault Studies*, 22, 177-207.
- Pourmokhtari, N. (2021). *Iran’s Green Movement: everyday resistance, political contestation and social mobilization*. Routledge.
- Rivetti, P. (2020). *Political participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*. Palgrave.
- Shavarini, M. (2005). The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education. *International Review of Education*, 51(4).
- S. DeBano, W. (2005). Enveloping Music in Gender, Nation, and Islam: Women's Music

- Festivals in Post-Revolutionary Iran. *Music and Society in Iran*, 38(3).
- Tahmasebi, S. (2012). The One Million Signatures Campaign: An effort born on the streets. *Amnesty International, Middle East and North Africa Regional Office*. Retrieved from <<http://amnestymena.org/en/Magazine/Issue20/TheOneMillionSignatureCampaigninIran.aspx?articleID=1101>>.
- Tavaana. (2016). One million signatures: The battle for gender equality in Iran. Retrieved from <<https://tavaana.org/en/content/one-million-signatures-battle-gender-equality-iran>>.
- Tohidi, N. (2006). "Islamic feminism": Negotiating patriarchy and modernity in Iran. In I. M. Abu-Rabi. *The Blackwell companion to contemporary Islamic thought* (Ed). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 624-643.
- Vakil, S (2011). *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.