Unveiling the Impacts of Islamic Regulations and the Limitations of Islamic Feminism: Experiences of Women from Iran

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ABSTRACT

In Iran, strict Islamic regulations significantly impact women's lives, imposing legal and social restrictions that limit personal freedoms and exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities. While Islamic feminism focuses on cultural and religious recognition, it may neglect pressing issues and exclude non-Muslim women. This qualitative study that included semi-structured interviews with fifteen Iranian women who had recently migrated to Australia and of diverse religious identities focussed on how gender dynamics in Iran contribute to gender (in)equality. The interview questions addressed various aspects, including personal backgrounds, family dynamics, societal treatment, cultural norms, and self-perceptions. The findings revealed that the compulsory hijab and other enforced traditions restricted freedoms, subjected women to scrutiny, and caused emotional distress. Societal judgment and lack of support further contributed to an environment where women felt unsafe and vulnerable to harassment. Importantly, this article applies an inclusive feminist theoretical framework (Zack, 2005) that transcends religious and cultural constraints, respecting both Islam and feminism. Through the women's experiences, this feminist approach is applied to understand and reveal the limitations that Islamic feminism can have for some Iranian women.

Keywords: inclusive feminism, Iranian women, women's rights, Islamic Feminism, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Following Mahsa Jina Amini's death in 2022 in the custody of the 'morality police' in Tehran due to her improper hijab, Iranian cities experienced daily anti-government protests by young women and men. The protests snowballed, leading to waves of demonstrations in approximately 160 cities, with participants chanting anti-regime slogans (Darvishi, 2023). The government responded with violence and brutality, leading to an estimated 500 demonstrators being killed and more than 15,000 people being arrested. Iranian women globally united in solidarity, marching on the streets (Khatam, 2023). The sight of women within Iran, unveiled and at the forefront of these protests, burning their headscarves, alongside Iranian women abroad without an Islamic hijab, exhibiting secular attire, challenged global perceptions of Muslim women. The protestors rallied behind the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' (Dabiri, 2023; Rouhi, 2022), which emphasised the importance of women's rights at the core of human existence and liberty. They also voiced their opposition to the Islamic government through other slogans like 'Death to the Dictator' and 'Down with Khamenei' (Khatam, 2023).

In February 2023, a group of independent Iranian trade unions, feminist organisations, and student groups released a 12-point manifesto that expanded upon and defined the significance of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement. Their manifesto aimed to put an end to oppression, discrimination, tyranny, and dictatorship (*Iran Wire*, 2023). In a show of solidarity with this movement, the 2023 Simone de Beauvoir Prize, an esteemed international award that recognises women's rights, was awarded to Iranian women. This was the second time the prize had been granted to Iranian women, with the first occasion occurring in 2009 when it was awarded to the 'One Million Signatures' campaign. This earlier campaign, led by the women's rights movement in Iran, challenged discriminatory laws in the country and demanded reform (Sameh, 2019). Despite these campaigns and movements, within Iran, feminism is still depicted as the paradigmatic representation of indulgent Western imperialist beliefs, and as ostensibly incongruous with Islamic values (Asadi Zeidabadi and Aghtaie, 2023).

The history of women's rights activities in Iran can be traced back to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1908 which led to the transfer of power to Parliament. This marked the start of modernisation in Iran.

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However, when women were initially denied the right to vote, feminist associations emerged and advocated for women's rights, leading to the rise of a feminist discourse among urban, middle, and upper-class women critiquing gender discrimination, including the exclusion of women from political life (Badran, 2005). Then, between 1962 and 1978, as part of Mohammad Reza Shah's White Revolution, Iranian women gained new rights such as the right to vote, permission to occupy public office, an expansion of divorce and custody rights and reduced polygamy (Najmabadi, 1991; Welslau, 2023). However, the subsequent Islamic Revolution in 1979 brought in limitations on women's social and political activities. The new government viewed women as responsible for the moral health of the country and imposed strict dress codes and segregation (Najmabadi, 1991). Critics have argued that women's rights have been significantly diminished since the revolution, with discriminatory laws and practices persisting (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Kar, 2007; Moghadam, 1992).

Islamic feminism emerged in response to conservative views and has aimed to interpret Islam in a way that benefits women (Ahmadi, 2006). For example, Islamic feminists advocated for reinterpreting Sharia law to promote gender equality in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. They argued that true Islam supports women's egalitarian status in the family and society and their education and employment opportunities (Moghadam, 2002). However, after the formation of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the Islamic code of behaviour was enforced in schools, universities, and workplaces, mandating wearing of the hijab by women and restriction of cosmetic use. For instance, female students may be denied entry if wearing makeup and be asked to remove it (Golkar, 2016). Additionally, studies (Foroutan, 2019; Paivandi, 2012) on gender socialisation in Iranian primary school textbooks reveal a notable bias favouring males, with females having limited representation in work settings. Fathers are depicted as primary providers, while mothers' employment roles are acknowledged but minimised (Foroutan, 2019). Furthermore, in common with other Middle Eastern nations, feminism is stigmatised as a Western and dangerous ideology, deemed detrimental to traditional family values and gender relations. This led to arrests and propaganda against activists, prompting many women to eschew the feminist label for fear of imprisonment (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). Consequently, Islamic feminism, though the only acceptable form of feminism in Iran, is not meeting all of Iranian women's needs.

In this article, I use inclusive feminism as a theoretical framework to argue that the imposition of fundamental Islamic principles negatively impacts the everyday lives of Iranian women, particularly in relation to the consequences of speaking up. While Islamic feminism seeks to improve conditions for women, it remains bound to a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings (Moghissi, 2011). Not all women in Iran are Muslim. To ensure that all women's voices - not solely those of Muslim women - are heard, there is a necessity for research that shares the perspectives of Iranian women from the diversity of religious positionings that exist.

To do this, I will draw on the work of Naomi Zack (2005)[1] to underpin how inclusive feminism is understood and applied in my research. According to Zack, feminism should not be anchored in specific identities within womanhood, as womanhood itself is an overarching relational concept that encompasses all women (Zack, 2005, 2007, 2018). She suggests three essential criteria for defining womanhood within the framework of inclusive feminism: the definition must be applicable to all women as they exist or can be conceived; it must align with the goal of feminist critical theory, which aims to enhance the lives of women; and it must effectively bridge the gap between language, theory, and the real-world issues faced by women (Zack, 2007: 203). Zack posits that what unites women is not a shared identity but rather a shared relationality, which inadvertently (or perhaps directly and purposefully) challenges strands of feminism that focus on identity positions, Islamic feminism included (Zack, 2007). In relation to the Iranian context, I discuss how applying inclusive feminism can address diverse women's realities, align feminist theory with enhancing women's lives, and bridge theoretical insights with practical challenges.

The next sections are structured as follows: 'Feminism in Iran' provides historical and contemporary context for women's activism in Iran from the early 20th century to Reza Shah Pahlavi's reforms promoting women's roles and contrasted with the post-1979 Islamic Revolution's imposition of the compulsory hijab and the emergence of Islamic feminism amidst critiques of its inclusivity. 'Methodology' details my qualitative research approach. 'Findings' presents the research results on Iranian women's lived experiences, and 'Discussion' analyses these findings from the perspectives of Islamic feminism and an inclusive feminism framework. Finally, the 'Conclusion' summarises key insights.

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[1] Although Zack's work originates from a U.S. context, it is applicable to Iran, as my study shows that Iranian women are diverse beyond their global Muslim perception. Integrating Zack's inclusive approach allows for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of Iranian women.

FEMINISM IN IRAN

Women's activism in Iran dates to earlier movements such as the Tobacco Protest (1890) and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 during the Qajar dynasty (Moghissi, 2008). In the subsequent dynasty, Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi shah (1925-1941), drew ideas of secular nationalism from Turkish leader Ataturk and proposed that women should be involved in the construction of the new state bureaucracy, be granted access to education and employment opportunities, and abandon traditional clothing such as the veil. The Pahlavi shahs, particularly Mohammad Reza, introduced reforms that granted women voting rights, participation in public office, and enhanced legal protections, albeit with state control (Afary, 2009; Najmabadi, 1991). Notable figures like Farrokhroo Parsa and Mahnaz Afkhami played crucial roles in advocating for women's rights through secular and nationalist feminist strategies in Iran during the 1970s (Afkhami, 2022). However, state suppression of opposition under the Pahlavi dynasty fuelled conservative religious mobilisation, which curtailed women's movements, contributing to the downfall of the Shah (Moghissi, 2008). In response, a significant political shift took place that led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It was driven by the concept of '*Gharbzadegi*,' or 'Westoxification,' popularised by Ahmad (2000)[2] which portrayed women embracing Western styles as symbols of cultural erosion (Najmabadi, 1998).

In fact, Iranian women with diverse motivations played significant roles in establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moghissi (2016) has categorised them into three groups: marginalised working women seeking pragmatic gains; urban middle-class women resisting modernising policies while advocating gender-based labour divisions; and educated young women gravitating towards socialist or Islamic-Marxist ideologies or radical Shi'ism. Throughout the Islamic Revolution, a perspective emerged that idealised women as devoted mothers and submissive wives. This resulted in curbing their social and political roles. The imposition of the compulsory hijab underscored this transformation, diminishing women's individuality and reinforcing a new conservative identity under theocratic rule (Behrouzan, 2005; Nafisi, 2008; Toolo and Shakibaee, 2000). Patriarchy in Iran, deeply rooted in culture, has been further reinforced by post-1979 Revolution Islamic governmental traditions based on Sharia law. These traditions view women as dependents requiring male control and state protection. Despite constitutional claims, women legally remain second-class citizens (Asadi Zeidabadi and Aghtaie, 2023).

Many women, both secularist and religiously oriented, became increasingly alarmed by the conservative interpretation of Islam propagated by the Islamist movement, prompting them to advocate for a progressive Islamic approach (Badran, 2005). Iranian women activists faced challenges balancing loyalty to the state and advocating for women's rights amid government pressure, arrest, and imprisonment. Prevailing authoritarianism hindered effective strategies, leading to the adoption of non-confrontational and reform-oriented approaches (Tohidi, 2016). Islamic feminism, as a concept, found currency in the mid-1990s and it was used to distinguish a brand of feminism or the activities of Muslim women seeking to reform, in women's favour, social practices and legal provisions that rule Muslim societies (Moghissi, 2011). While other types of feminists faced repression, Islamic feminism as a response to theocratic governance aimed to reinterpret religious teachings for women's rights, merged faith and gender empowerment.

Islamic feminism critiqued the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran and called for a re-evaluation. It advocated for women's rights within the framework of religion, and aimed to work within the Islamic regime (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). Islamic feminism highlighted the outcomes and implications of patriarchy and its influence and effect on society (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). It supported egalitarian principles in gender relations and rejected the notion of equality based on the understanding of complementary gender roles (Badran, 2013).

Although some aspects of women's lives, such as literacy levels, have improved due to the efforts of Islamic feminists, the regime's values still restrict women's roles and discourages women's activities outside the home. Strategies like the compulsory hijab and early retirement policies reduced women's participation in the workforce and in the public sphere generally (Hoodfar, 1994; Hoominfar and Zanganeh, 2021). Critics of Islamic feminism (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Moghissi, 2011) argue it avoids addressing oppressive gender practices and discourages critical analysis of Sharia-based reforms. They contend that the promotion of Islamic feminism limits diverse voices and strategies, prioritising only those aligned with an Islamic framework, thus restricting authentic representation of women's agency in Muslim cultures (Moghissi, 2011). Despite the efforts of Islamic feminists in Iran, they have not been successful enough to negate the needs of many Iranian women. Since the emergence of the Islamic Revolution, there has been an irregular series of protest movements and campaigns since the late 1970s (Afary, 2009; Hashemi, 2018).

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[2] Jalal Al-e-Ahmad was a notable Iranian novelist, short-story writer, translator, philosopher, and socio-political critic, also known for his work as a sociologist and anthropologist. His book titled *Gharbzadegi* was published in Farsi in Iran in 1962. The version cited here is its translation, published in the year 2000.

Table 1. An overview of the diverse backgrounds of the research participants

No	Pseudonym	Religion	Marital status and visa type upon departure from Iran	Year of arrival	Age at the time of interview
1	Ahoo	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2016	30s
2	Azadeh	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2018	40s
3	Ayda	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2017	30s
4	Arezoo	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2006	40s
5	Banafsheh	Non-religious	Married (skilled visa)	2019	30s
6	Bita	Non-religious	Married (skilled visa)	2019	30s
7	Samira	Non-religious	Married (partner visa)	2015	40s
8	Salumeh	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2017	50s
9	Sima	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2016	40s
10	Sarvenaz	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2019	40s
11	Sudabeh	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2020	40s
12	Sona	Non-religious	Married (partner visa)	2010	30s
13	Darya	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2000	60s
14	Dorsa	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2019	40s
15	Delara	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2005	70s

Using an inclusive feminist framing allows an examination of potential limitations of Islamic feminism in addressing the complex and varied experiences of women in Iran. While Islamic feminism seeks to reconcile Islamic principles with feminist ideals by interpreting Islamic teachings in a more women-friendly way, this focus can overlook the everyday needs of women, particularly those who do not fit within the Islamic faith (Afary and Anderson. 2023; Rouhi, 2022). In Iran, strict Islamic regulations significantly impact all women's lives, creating legal and social restrictions that limit personal freedoms and exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities (Rouhi, 2022). By focusing primarily on cultural and religious recognition, Islamic feminism may neglect these pressing issues, excluding women who do not identify as Muslim and who lack freedom and support. In Iran, mostly Muslims, especially Shia Muslims, have privileges, while those identifying as non-religious face persecution (Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). 'Apostasy' is, in principle, punishable by death in Iran (Nixon, 2020). Consequently, individuals who speak against Islamic principles may face discrimination or harassment under the guise of Islam (Bielefeldt, 2016). My study is significant as Iranian women from diverse backgrounds shared their experiences openly. Situated in Australia, participants felt safe to express themselves more freely. By amplifying these voices, my research enriches understandings of gender dynamics in Iran, contributing to the advancement of gender equality and social justice.

METHODOLOGY

My study employs a qualitative research approach rooted in the interpretivist paradigm (Angen, 2000) and informed by feminist qualitative research traditions (Harding, 2007; Olesen, 2011). The chosen methodology aims to elucidate the nuanced experiences of individuals within specific socio-religious contexts. This article is framed by two research questions:

1. How does living in a Muslim-governed country influence the personal and social lives of Iranian women?
2. To what extent has Islamic feminism been effective in supporting Iranian women's needs?

Fifteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in 2021. These interviews, lasting between 60 to 120 minutes, took place in person, at times convenient for participants and were audio recorded with their consent. I conducted the interviews in Farsi, the participants' native language, which was crucial for effective communication and enabled them to express their thoughts and feelings with clarity and precision (Maydell, 2010). Participants were recruited in collaboration with local community organisations to ensure cultural sensitivity and to leverage trusted intermediaries. Recruitment involved disseminating information via emails and at various cultural events hosted by these organisations. Interested individuals contacted me directly to discuss their potential involvement. Eligible participants were Iranian women over 18 years old who had resided in Australia for over two years and currently based in Tasmania. In my study, the participants were divided into two main groups: humanitarian visa refugees, and migrants. The humanitarian visa group comprised of Iranian Bahá'í refugees who had fled their home country due to religious persecution. The migrant group consisted of three subgroups: students, skilled workers, and wives of the skilled or student visa applicants (entering the country on a Partner visa). Participants had diverse religious viewpoints, including non-religious individuals, Muslims who did not wear hijabs, and conservative Bahá'ís. **Table 1** provides an overview of the diverse backgrounds of the research participants within the study context. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.

Thematic analysis, following Knott *et al.* (2022), was employed for analysing the interviews. First, all the interview transcripts were read before initial coding was undertaken to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. The first round of coding focused on identifying descriptive themes based on common experiences among participants, such as the compulsory hijab, having sexual relationships with boyfriends, and gender discrimination. The second round of coding involved an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts and critically engaging with emerging themes relating to participants' emotional experiences of everyday practices. This allowed for a nuanced exploration of the research questions, which are presented in the following sections. To ensure the accuracy and credibility of my findings, member checking was employed, where participants reviewed the interpretations drawn from their interviews. I demonstrated credibility through member checking, and authentic engagement with participants, ensuring confidence in the 'truth' of my findings (Lincoln and Guba*,* 1985; Stahl and King, 2020). After each interview, participants were informed that they could access free counselling by the university for debriefing as needed. I also found that scheduling dedicated time for reflection and journaling after data collection was beneficial for exploring my thoughts and feelings before conducting the next interview. By providing rich, thick descriptions of Iranian women's experiences, the research allowed for transferability, whereby my findings offer insights that may be relevant to similar socio-religious contexts with comparable oppressive regimes for women. The study's dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of the research process, allowing replication of methods by other researchers under similar conditions. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining a clear audit trail and using reflexive practices, ensuring that my findings were shaped by the respondents' perspectives rather than by researcher bias or interests. My study[3] has received ethics approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: 21783).

My lived experience as an Iranian woman in Australia informed the research design. Being fluent in both Farsi and English facilitated my investigation. As an 'insider' (Watts, 2006) sharing an identity with my participants, I could see from their perspectives. Embracing reflexivity and feminist standpoint theory, I aimed for genuine engagement with the data (Knott *et al.*, 2022) and awareness of how positionality can shape the research process and outcomes.

In what follows, I present themes related to the emotional impacts experienced by participants of living in an Islamic-governed country. Themes include experiences of guilt, fear, anxiety, and worry caused by the enforcement of Islamic rules on women; experiences of safety in public spaces and pervasive everyday harassment; experiences of anxiety, shame and stress as a consequence of stigma around premarital sex; and experiences of resentment, fear and isolation associated with needing to suppress individual identity due to dress codes, alongside concealment of relationships and feminist views. I then move on to the discussion section where I apply an inclusive feminist lens to reveal the limitations of Islamic feminism in advancing progress in Iran for women.

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF ENFORCING ISLAMIC RULES

The enforcement of Islamic rules on the women profoundly shaped their emotional experiences. My findings revealed significant government efforts for citizens to internalise Islamic regulations from a young age, with children learning Islamic values in their families and having them reinforced in the education system. In many conservative Muslim families, children are compelled by their parents to practice Islam, with religious duties obligatory for women from the age of nine (Nashat, 2021). For example, Ahoo explained that, as her parents had full-time jobs when she was a child, she spent quite a lot of time with her aunt's family who were living upstairs. They were a conservative Muslim family, and they forced her to dress in alignment with Islamic requirements. In her interview, Ahoo questioned the forced practices at home, wondering why she was compelled to wake up early to pray or fast. At eight years old, she recounted experiencing feelings of guilt and fear, believing that not adhering to these practices would make God stop loving her and lead her to hell.

> I remember for a while I didn't want to pray at all. I gave up. I said that I didn't understand why I had to pray. I didn't pray. Or when my hair was out of the scarf, I felt so guilty. I felt that now God doesn't love me anymore, it's over, and I'm going to hell. I was 8 years old and still under religious duty-bound age in Islam.

These teachings were also reinforced in school settings. Female students, for example, were required to follow the Islamic dress code and participate in school prayers. Participants mentioned that school staff valued students who practiced Islam in addition to their regular studies. Ayda, from a Muslim family that did not practice Islam at home,

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[3] My study is part of my PhD research project, which I began in 2020 in the field of Sociology at the University of Tasmania and completed on August 15, 2024.

shared her feelings about being at school and compared herself to peers who could memorise the Quran. This made her feel inadequate, even though she did not value it. She said, 'I used to think to myself that maybe I'm not smart.' Another participant, Azadeh, came from a similar family. She had not learned how to pray at home and worried that school staff would find out, which embarrassed her. She recounted her teacher telling the class, 'If you don't have a hijab, they will hang you from your hair in hell, and your hair will look like a snake.' She imagined her hair turning into a snake with horror – terrifying images of the consequences of not following the Islamic religion.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches progressive revelation, emphasising unity of God, humanity, and religion, alongside equality of men and women, science-religion harmony, and community (Lawson, 2012). Bahá'í believers are persecuted in Iran primarily due to their adherence to a faith that diverges from the dominant Shia Islam and challenges the religion of the state (Asim, 2023). Iran's Supreme Leader has labelled Bahá'ís as unbelievers and ritually impure, leading to severe persecution. Bahá'ís are barred from public schools, universities, and government jobs (Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2021). Dorsa recalls her high school principal's abusive behaviour:

> She would take me to the office and start swearing at me because I was a Bahá'í. Or she would say to my friends, 'Why are you friends with her? They are unclean.' My friends used to come and tell me. I was upset, but there was nothing we could do.

Participants highlighted the emotional impact of enforced Islamic rules on them in Iran, emphasising how deviations from social norms in public places lead to public judgment, disturbing women's privacy, and peace of mind. Samira recounted an incident on a bus when she was 19 years old, in her hometown. A woman in a chador[4] accused her of seducing husbands of other women because of her attire. 'She said 'What is this scarf (you are wearing)? Half of your hair is out. Don't you have parents?!' Terrified by the judgmental stares, Samira got off the bus and went home in tears, resolving never to return to that city. This experience highlights the severe emotional consequences the women faced due to societal enforcement of Islamic dress codes. Similarly, Banafsheh discussed the mental health impact of constant harassment in public spaces, stating, 'When I was in Iran, being a woman was very restrictive for me. You could easily feel that you're a second-class citizen.' She described the continuous self-consciousness and vigilance required to navigate public spaces. 'Sometimes, when I was walking somewhere, I would imagine to myself, "If I were a man, how would I feel walking in this alley? If I were a man, it would be as if the streets and the alleys belonged to me. As a woman, you must be vigilant when you walk."' These experiences shed light on the pervasive anxiety and restriction the women faced under these social and religious norms.

SECURITY AND HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC PLACES

Of significance for participants, were their experiences of security and harassment in everyday public places. My findings revealed daily harassment in the streets of Iran was a common experience for participants, ranging from being stared at or catcalled, to private cars stopping to pick them up, and even instances of sexual assault.

> Once I was coming back home from school. I was on the footbridge. A man jumped over me and grabbed my breast. I almost fell off the bridge. I fainted. I couldn't do anything, and he wouldn't let me go. (Bita)

Several participants expressed that they could not speak up for fear of being judged, accused of creating the situation, or shamed by the public. They believed that this reluctance stemmed from a pervasive notion that women are to blame for the harassment they receive on the streets based on their dress or actions. Consequently, they often endured the abuse in silence, feeling embarrassed and helpless. Arezoo shared an incident illustrating this issue: 'Once, I was sitting in a taxi and a man sitting next to me was leaning a lot against me. I was very uncomfortable. I told him, "Dear sir, could I ask you to sit properly?"' Arezoo noted that such confrontations are rare because frequently reacting to such behaviour would require women getting angry multiple times a day. Some participants believed that separation between genders and the stigma that has been attached to sexual relationships has encouraged men to be more sexually aggressive towards women. They said that in Iran, many men allow themselves to behave as they wish without considering women's permission or feelings. Participants found this behaviour very disrespectful. My findings show that the uncontrolled freedom of men and the exclusion of women from public spaces have created a dangerous and unsafe environment for women, which aligns with the findings of Chubin (2014). Ahoo, who said her father would follow her on the way to school, believed that he was protecting

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[4] In Iran, the national outfits are known as *Chador* and *Manto*. *Chador* is a large black piece of cloth covering the entire body, leaving only the face exposed, while a *Manto* is a coat-like garment covering the upper body, requiring pants or a long skirt and a headscarf to complete the ensemble.

her from boys. Samira told a similar story about her father who was worried and always would pick her up from school. Darya believed that it was the right decision for parents to protect their daughters from men.

STIGMA AROUND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Islamic governance could be felt in private spaces too. Participants highlighted the significance of virginity for men in Iran, noting the societal pressure for women to remain virgins until marriage (Yavari, 2024). Despite some not believing in its importance, the demand for virginity certificates in conservative families added stress, leading some of the women to resort to illegal procedures to restore their virginity. One participant expressed her fear of societal judgment regarding her sexual history and its impact on her marriage prospects:

> You have this fear, what if I want to get married? My friend used to say, 'What if the groom's family asks you for a virginity certificate.' I would say that I will marry a man who accepts this. They would say 'No, what if his family doesn't accept.' I'd say that well, if he doesn't want me, he won't marry me. They would say 'What if your mum and dad find out?' (Ahoo)

In Iran, where virginity is highly valued, violating this norm can lead to severe consequences such as honour killings (Heydari *et al.*, 2021). Premarital relationships brought mental challenges because of the need to conceal them, along with the fear of societal repercussions if discovered. Some of the research participants experienced significant concerns and stress while involved in these relationships. In addition to having to deal with the consequences of losing their virginity, which can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt and regret, they had to bear the stress of hiding their relationship status so that no one found out or reported them to the police.

> When I wanted to bring my boyfriend to my house, I was afraid that neighbours might report or call the security forces. When I would pick him up in my car, I would cover him with a blanket until we'd reach my apartment. He would get into my place like a smuggled cargo. … all of this gives you stress. (Azadeh)

The stigma surrounding intimate relationships, particularly regarding the importance placed on virginity, presented considerable distress for the women while living in Iranian society. This societal pressure induced anxiety and fear especially among those who engaged in sexual activity prior to marriage which compelled them to conceal their true selves.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND BELIEF SUPPRESSION

Most of the participants expressed that the enforcement of traditional gender and religious norms, as well as the consequences of not complying with them, caused them to adopt personas that did not reflect their true selves, akin to wearing a mask to conceal their identity. Arezoo, for example, grappled with the conflict between her desire for self-expression and the fear of her father's violent reaction upon discovering her secret boyfriend.

> I had sex with my boyfriend and my father would've had a stroke if he had known. Its consequence could be so horrible that I couldn't imagine what would happen. This is a terrible risk, and you live with and learn how to handle it. The anxiety never ends. Very hard. Very unpleasant.

Concealing her relationship felt like compromising her identity, yet the potential danger outweighed her personal freedom. She stated: 'I couldn't be 100% of myself for sure, either as a woman or as a human being.' The pressure on women in relationships was immense due to societal norms and legal constraints, restricting their ability to openly pursue healthy relationships. According to Arezoo, navigating this societal pressure required maintaining a facade of singleness while being in a relationship, leading to a sense of hypocrisy and the constant anxiety of being discovered.

The interviews also revealed how the mandatory Islamic regulations created a complex interplay between personal desire and societal expectations. For example, participants highlighted that they could dress up in the way that they like, but suggested that they dressed in a way that would not cause them trouble. They often felt they were restricted in showing their identity. For example, Arezoo shared her desire to wear brightly coloured *mantos*, though noted the risks for doing so:

> Me and many other women like me knew that wearing this style has consequences. You will be annoyed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basijs (who are subordinate to and receive their orders from the IRGC and the Supreme Leader of Iran), or in the streets, by men who call you

with unpleasant titles. However, you are a woman, and you want to wear whatever you like, everyone love freedom, so, you buy it and wear it.

She went on to express the continued psychological diligence that was needed for this 'silent war'. Here, it can be observed how women constantly navigated the balance between protecting themselves and the desire to be themselves. Despite all the efforts of the Islamic government to repress women and to prevent the spread of feminist ideas by censoring media and books, some participants read feminist writers' books which stirred them to resist the daily sexism or misogyny described above. They drew motivation from feminist writers and figures and viewed these women as role models for standing up against oppressive societal norms and customs. Azadeh explained, 'I was inspired by writers like Oriana Fallaci and Simone de Beauvoir. I loved independent women very much.'

Several participants experienced Islamic laws as oppressive and discriminatory, viewing them as a source of humiliation that further entrenched gender inequality. They highlighted laws such as blood money,[5] which allows for a lighter penalty in cases of honour killings, and inheritance, which grants daughters only half the inheritance that sons receive (Moghadam, 2013). Additionally, family laws like child custody laws, which immediately grant children to the father upon divorce, were seen as particularly problematic.

> Hearing the news of the murders is painful. It's very painful for a woman. Why (do these murders happen)? Because we are a woman? We happen to have a lot more endurance than men. Unfortunately, the Islamic Republic of Iran is making a big difference (between women and men). Our law discriminates against women. There is no equal right at all, and this is painful. (Sima)

Participants stated that expressing antireligious ideas or criticising the government could result in losing their job, imprisonment, or even risking one's life (Manocha and Tahzib, 2018; Partow *et al.*, 2023). Due to this fear, the women hid their beliefs, censored themselves, and pretended to adhere to religious practices. Women, in particular, are forced to hide their beliefs to avoid judgment from family and society or to maintain job security. Banafshe explained:

> What I used to hide most of the time in Iran was that I'm not a religious person and I don't like Islam. I'm not interested in religion. I wouldn't say this. I was ashamed living in a country where authorities were so misogynist and didn't care about human rights, but you had to hide it and said you were okay.

One of the participants, who did not like to lie about her personality and beliefs, tried to isolate herself to avoid exposure to society and pretending to be a good Muslim woman. She also felt unwelcome in that society and was scared to join it.

> I wasn't engaged so much in society. I think I kept myself deliberately a little bit away from society. I didn't really want to be a member of that society because I think they wouldn't accept me. They don't like such a woman. I was almost isolated in some way. (Ayda)

Samira who had been working in Tehran believed that women should be careful about the topics they discuss in the workplace. They could not talk about women's rights, and they had to hide their beliefs. For her, it was like hiding part of her identity, and if she did not, she might lose her job.

> In a more private situation, you can talk, but in public, especially if there are some religious people, you are not comfortable because you might lose your job. You have no job security. You could not talk about politics, government, women's clothing, and freedom. The differences between men and women were applied, but you should have thought that there was no difference. Everything that the Islamic society didn't accept was taboo. You should be aware that at work with your colleagues you must pretend that you're not who you are, otherwise, they may report you, this happens a lot.

Many participants expressed that they felt trapped in a 'cage' in Iran, denied freedom of thought and expression. They believed education provided them with a pathway to escape and to live a life free from imposed limitations and restrictions. As Azadeh expressed, 'In Iran, I was always thinking of escaping. I wanted to be free. I felt like I was in a cage. I saw myself in a cage, a big cage called Iran.' The pressure on participants in Iran became unbearable, leading them to contemplate fleeing the country. Despite their university education and potential for contributing to the country's development, they felt restricted and longed for a freedom and action that they believed could only be found elsewhere.

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5 The amount of 'blood-money' payable to the family of a murdered woman is half the amount that is payable to the family of a murdered man.

DISCUSSION

In the light of the women's experiences, I discuss how inclusive feminism can be applied to participants' experiences drawing Zack's (2007) three points as outlined above. First, Zack (2007) stated, womanhood—or inclusive feminism in this instance—must be applicable to all women. My findings demonstrate that Islamic practices were enforced, and those who did not comply were punished from a young age in schools or families. The structuring of Islamic teachings in children's lives is observed elsewhere with Naz *et al.* (2023) identifying how curriculum textbooks in Pakistan, a similarly fundamentalist Muslim-governed country to Iran, strategically shape gender identities by emphasising traditional gender roles, portraying women young and old mainly as caregivers confined to domestic spaces and clad according to Islamic dress codes. Based on this experience, on the one hand, an inclusive feminism appears necessary to ensure that all women's voices and perspectives are acknowledged and valued in the pursuit of gender equality, not only those of Muslim women. On the other hand, my findings showed that enforced adherence to Islamic norms suppressed diverse beliefs and feminist ideas.

Women's rights activists who label themselves feminists are often associated with Western ideologies by conservative Muslims (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). While Western interpretations of feminism are not accepted in Iran, Islamic feminism has gained some traction. For example, Mir-Hosseini (2011), a self-proclaimed Islamic feminist works within the Iranian system and interprets Islamic Sharia in favour of women. Yet, my research revealed that there are women in Iran who are not Muslim and do not wish to adhere to Islamic rules, preferring to make their own choices. The experiences documented in this study reveal the limited capacity of an identity-based feminism (Zack, 2020) to empower and advocate on behalf of all Iranian women. A broader feminist discourse that acknowledges and respects the plurality of women's identities is needed (Zack, 2005, 2007). An inclusive feminism in Iran would provide a more comprehensive platform for advancing gender equality, accommodating varied cultural and religious interpretations, and promoting women's agency beyond the confines of traditional religious paradigms. This approach is essential for fostering genuine societal transformation and empowering women to assert their rights and aspirations freely.

According to Zack (2007) an inclusive feminism must align with the objectives of feminist critical theory, which seeks to enhance the lives of women by providing tools to scrutinise and dismantle patriarchal systems, thereby fostering greater social and economic equity. My findings revealed that the ideology and policies of sex segregation and enforced Islamic dress codes, significant to the Islamic regime of Iran (Tohidi, 2016), have profoundly impacted participants' well-being and their integration into society throughout their lives. By grounding its definition of women in the real world and the practical problems they face, inclusive feminism seeks to address the diverse experiences and challenges encountered by women through a more comprehensive and realistic approach (Zack, 2007). Embracing an inclusive feminism can empower Iranian women by validating their experiences and advocating for their rights, thereby enhancing their lives and well-being. For instance, it can promote legal reforms that protect both secular and religious women from discrimination, ensuring their stories and needs shape policies, fostering solidarity and a comprehensive approach to gender equality.

Finally, inclusive feminism (Zack, 2007) must effectively bridge the gap between language, theory, and the real-world issues faced by women. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2005), when opposing gender segregation, emphasised that the Islamic Republic's policies spurred an indigenous feminist consciousness among women, legitimising previously suppressed awareness. Women began using terms like 'male dominance' and 'patriarchy' to challenge their experiences of sexism and misogyny and confront the status quo (Mir-Hosseini, 2005). This illustrates how theoretical concepts such as gender segregation, when applied to Iranian lives, contradicted the reality for some women and challenged their experiences of oppression and inequality. Participants in my study endured unwanted advances and assaults in public, undermining their autonomy and dignity, perceiving themselves to be objects of (unwanted) male desire. Contrary to the argument by some Islamic feminists that the hijab protects women from objectification (Abbas, 2023), my research revealed that neither the Islamic dress code nor sex segregation shielded women from harassment but left them feeling like sexual objects despite wearing the full hijab, a finding similarly reported in other studies conducted in Iran, such as Chubin (2014). These examples demonstrate how theoretical debates about the hijab in Islamic contexts are directly challenged by empirical evidence of women's lived experiences of harassment and objectification.

Premarital activities provide another example that illustrates the gap between Islamic theories and some women's lives in the real world in Iran, which inclusive feminism can address by bridging this gap. Evidence from my study and others (Afary, 2009; Motamedi *et al.*, 2016; Salehi *et al.*, 2020) indicates that although the social and physical interactions between men and women before marriage are restricted by Iran's sexual code, Iranians are involved in such interactions. For instance, research participants in Salehi *et al.* (2020) expressed concerns about public health and advocated for the right to choose relationships freely. They highlighted the increasing trend of 'white wedding' and the need for societal acceptance of sexual relationships as a basic right. Yet, some Islamic

feminists argue that Islam perceives male-female relationships as inherently sexual and advocates for controlling women's perceived sexual power through veiling (Moghadam, 2002).

Due to all the restrictions and harsh consequences, participants had to conceal their true identities and live double lives. These findings are reminiscent of Zack's (2007) critique of intersectionality, which claims a splintering of feminism based on various markers of identity (including race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ableness, and age) shifts attention away from the real-world problems faced by women. Iranian women, according to Salehi *et al.*'s (2020) study, learned to adopt multiple identities from a young age to conform to societal expectations which negatively impacted their quality of life. My study's participants insisted to me that they were more than the sum of their parts; they were multiple, complex beings all of the time, which shows the need for a feminism inclusive of and addressing the diversity of experiences and identities that exist and how these are situated within social structures that have structuring effects on equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The combination of Islamic-inspired legislation and patriarchal culture in Iran had a significant impact on the personal and social life of Iranian women that I interviewed. The forced imposition of specific Islamic traditions and laws, such as the compulsory hijab restricted women's freedom, subjected them to constant scrutiny, and caused emotional distress. The lack of support for women in speaking up and the societal judgment they faced further contributed to an insecure society where women felt unsafe and vulnerable to harassment and assault. My findings revealed that many participants were critical of the ways in which the patriarchal interpretation of Islam perpetuated gender inequalities. This led to a disparity between constitutional provisions, such as Sharia-based family law, and women's lived experiences. Whether aware of Western feminist debates or not, these women rejected patriarchal ideologies and instead desired gender equality.

While my research predates the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement in Iran, the recent protests have highlighted the contradictions between women's everyday lives and the Islamic laws that govern them. These events have ignited a renewed conversation about the relationship between Islam and feminism, a complex and multifaceted topic. It is crucial to approach this topic with careful consideration, acknowledging the various interpretations and practices within Islam and the diversity within the feminist movement. Many Islamic feminists (Ahmed, 2021; Mir-Hosseini, 2006) argue that Islam, at its core, promotes justice, equality, and the dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender. They contend that it is the misinterpretation of religious texts and the imposition of patriarchal cultural practices that have led to the subjugation of women. However, both my findings, derived from firsthand accounts from Iranian women, and evidence gleaned from existing literature (Afary and Anderson, 2023; Moghissi, 2011; Tohidi, 2016) show that Islamic feminism cannot alone attend to the diverse needs and lived experiences of women in Iran and Muslim-majority nations.

Moving forward with only Islamic feminism stifles exploration of alternative voices and strategies within cultural contexts of countries like Iran. Prioritising Islamic feminism marginalises other perspectives, and limits women's agency to those aligned with Islamic frameworks. By sharing hidden layers of women's lives in Iran, my research has highlighted the need for an inclusive feminist discourse that transcends religious and cultural constraints. In Iran's context, inclusive feminism should extend its relevance to encompass all women, including non-Muslims, in their diverse realities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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