

Voice for the Right of Females in Sports Fields: A Case Study of Protests in Iran

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Introduction

Gender parity is a historical problem affecting societies across the globe, with numerical historical records showing that women have always encountered inequalities in careers, homes, education, and the public. In modern times, sports fields make one of the major areas where gender disparity is mainly characterized by discrimination against women (Garland-Thomson 2020). In particular, a common phenomenon in sports is the perception of physical strength, dominance, and power, which are associated with males. In turn, it tends to cause gender discrimination and non-inclusion, negatively affecting women. Traditionally, most sports are associated with men and their interests, thus alienating females who wish to participate in sports. Nevertheless, there have been major changes in the sports world, especially after the second world war, with women increasingly participating in sports activities, management, and spectatorship (Garland-Thomson 2020). Efforts geared towards recognizing sports as a basic human right has contributed to this improvement over the last few decades. For instance, the Olympics Charter states that sports are a human right without discrimination, including sex and gender. The International Organizing Committee (IOC) of the global Olympics supports the promotion of female participation at all levels and the equality of both males and females.

Despite this, the improved participation of women and equality in sports is not uniform. Rather, social and cultural traditions, values, morals, beliefs, and politics have played an important role, with some nations remaining behind as others progress. In particular, women in many countries in the Muslim world remain highly discriminated against in sports, owing to their nations' cultures, traditions, belief systems, and politics (Mohammadi 2020). Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia provide good examples of nations where women's participation in sports

remains low due to discrimination (Mohammadi 2020). In some of these nations, the participation of women in sports is either banned or highly regulated and controlled. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran have strict rules that govern the types of sports that women should participate in or attend as spectators and the kind of costumes that female athletes should use when participating, which are often discriminatory (Mohammadi 2020). Nevertheless, in recent years, the feminist movement has gradually emerged in the Islamic region, calling for gender equality in sports and recognition of women's rights in the field (Mohammadi 2020). As expected, these voices have naturally led to conflicts and disputes with conservatives and regimes in the region.

At the recently concluded FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar, Iranian men's soccer players refused to sing the national anthem before the game. They refused to celebrate the goal during the game (Adegbola, Gearhart and Cho 2022). Together with their domestic fans, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the suppression of protests in Iran, their desire for fairness and justice and their dissatisfaction with Iran's domestic power dictatorship and conservative thinking to the whole world on a global cultural product like the World Cup (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). Iranian people are angry at the country's restrictions on women's clothing and law enforcement, which triggered protests. In September 2022, Mahsa Jina Amin, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, died in detention of the moral police after being accused of violating the laws related to headscarves, which became the fuse of the protest and triggered a large-scale protest (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). This protest has evolved into a widespread appeal to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Moreover, the people's defiance of the Iranian gender laws and protests against the Republic has openly emerged in sports, further attracting the international community's attention and the world (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022).

As the picture in figure 1 shows, Iranians participating in the global event carried their protests against the regime to Qatar to make the entire world, understand women's plight in the country and sensitize the global community about the same. Like many other protests in the past, feminism is at the core of the situation in Iran and is worth analysis from a theoretical and conceptual perspective. Consequently, this discussion aims to analyze this case by combining relevant literature, feminist theory and cases and then express personal critical views on this series of events. Although several feminist theories pertain to this case, classical liberal (libertarian), radical, and liberal feminism theories are the most applicable in examining the current protests in Iran over women's rights.



Figure 1. This media photograph in a stadium in Qatar during the FIFA 2022 World Cup shows Iranian spectators portraying banners advocating for women's freedom in their country.

Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis of Voice for the Female Rights in Sports: Case of Iranian Protests

Review of Literature

The defiance demonstrated by the Iranian soccer team and spectators during the 2022 FIFA World Cup indicates that the majority supports the feminist movement in the country's population, who are seeking not only to have the hijab rules changed but also to see a change in the regime. Iran is one of the nations that qualified for and participated in Qatar's just concluded 2022 FIFA World Cup event. However, its participation occurred when the Islamic nation faced massive protests as the population called for the recognition and protection of women as equals. The core of the protests involves demands for the change of hijab rules that demand that women be veiled in public, which is seen as a violation of female rights in the country. During the participation, the spectators openly carried banners large enough for the global media to capture. As the event depicted in Figure 1 indicates, the spectator's demand for women's freedom in Iran (Kurzman 2022). At the same time, spectators refused to cheer their team while the players refused to sing the Iranian national anthem and celebrate once they scored in the game as a show of solidarity with the people against the discriminatory rules and the regime. Consequently, the feminist nature of the protests is evident as it is the core concept that has sparked the protests.

Since the core principle of feminist theories is to include female experiences and perspectives in all practice and research, they apply to this case because the issue of interest is to describe and analyze the situation facing women in a society ruled by laws that greatly discriminate against women. According to Garland-Thomson (2020), feminist theories share several principles in common. First, they maintain that gender is a central organizing component of social life and includes victimization, criminal offending, and criminal justice processing. In

this case, gender is the socially constructed expectations about the behaviors and attitudes of men and women, known as masculinity and femininity (Butler, 2020). Secondly, feminist theories hold that women and girls are systematically marginalized or secluded as professionals and subjects of the study because of patriarchal sexism (Duran, 2018). Third, feminist theories combine theory with practice to develop just and equitable solutions to the problem (Butler, 2020). Even though these theories share common principles, they are diverse and apply to cases or situations specifically and differently. They include liberal feminism, radical feminism, postmodern and post-cultural feminism, multiracial feminism, and Marxist or socialist feminism (Butler, 2020). In the fight for female rights in sports, as portrayed in the case of the Iran protests, classical liberal (libertarian), radical, and liberal feminism theories are the most applicable in examining the current protests over women's rights in the country.



Figure 2: A picture of scene during street protests in Tehran, Iran, in Dec. 2022

Liberal feminism applies to the case of Iran because the principal aim of the protestors and participants is to abolish legal, political, and other forms of discrimination against women in the country to provide them with equal opportunities and freedoms as men, given that their autonomy has deficits (Butler 2020). Theoretically, liberal feminism emphasizes the equality of

women and men through legal and political reforms in a given society or country (Lugones and Spelman 2018). Gender discrimination in the public, workplace, or home and the patriarchal mentality is deeply rooted in Iranian society, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Mohammadi 2020). The revolution brought new ideas and laws purportedly based on the Shariah law, which has greatly discriminated against women in Iran (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). In most feminine movements, these factors play an important role as the causes of liberal women's movements. The major aim of liberal feminists is to alter the structure of society to achieve equal treatment of women (Butler 2020). Legal and formal aspects of society are targeted, with protestors calling for a change in the existing laws or regulations that instill or institute discrimination against women (Duran 2018). This is the situation in Iran, as demonstrated by the events when the country's soccer team participated in a major sports event in Qatar. The banners and the defiance portrayed by players and spectators carried the message that the laws in the country are discriminative against women and that there is a need for change to protect female rights and freedoms. Libertarian feminism also emphasizes women's ability to maintain and demonstrate their actions and personal choices (Kurzman 2022). Women ought to have the freedom to make decisions affecting their lives independently, including their choice of lifestyle, clothing and fashion. In Iran, this fundamental freedom is denied in the existing Islamic laws, which the protestors seek to change and introduce liberty for women.

Libertarian theory emphasizes the freedom from coercive interference, which holds that both genders have the right to this freedom due to their statuses as "self-owners." The idea is that no gender should have more freedom than others, whether at home, in the workplace, in education, health, or any social sphere (Butler 2020). Women have the liberty to forge their lives without interference or coercion by the state or men because they are equally self-owners with

the ability and capacity to make independent choices (Butler 2020). In the case of Iran, the protests are based on this concept, given that the core issue is to abolish the laws and regulations that discriminate against women, as exemplified by the rule on compulsory veiling. The rule of compulsory veiling is one of the examples of the various laws that act against women and favor men, including in sports where women are not allowed to appear in jerseys and costumes approved by relevant bodies such as FIFA and the Olympics' IOC (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). It should be noted that the protests by players and spectators in Qatar provide evidence that the people are aware of the need for the country to change the regulations and eliminate state coercion and interference with women's rights. Since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the regime has accumulated massive power of coercion, which is always at its disposal (Mohammadi 2020). Any defiance is met with a violent response by the authorities, with the police brutally cracking on the participants. Videos and pictures on social media provide evidence that the authorities have been using violence leveraged to contain the masses. So far, hundreds of deaths have resulted as the government seeks to contain the protests through fear, resolving to use live ammunition, lethal force, torture, rockets and drones. Despite this, the protests are continuous, proving that people are against coercive interference by the state. Women, who are at the forefront of the protests, are motivated by the libertarian ideas that they are equal to men as they are their "self-owners" and have the right to choose the kind of lifestyle they want to live, including fashion and design (Duran 2018).

On its part, radical feminism applies to the situation in Iran as it considers the society to be a sexist or male-controlled capitalist hierarchy. Theoretically, the radical feminist approach asserts the need for women to free themselves when the oppressive and dominating patriarchal system is eliminated or limited. There is a general feeling that the male-based or male-

dominated authority, power structure, and social system are responsible for the inequality, oppression, and discrimination against women (Lugones and Spelman 2018). As long as the status quo remains, society will not likely reform its power structure and authority in favor of gender equality. In view of this theory, the only alternative is to uproot and reconstruct the entire society to achieve equality and cope with gender discrimination. In the case of Iran, discriminating against women in society, including in sports, is a deep-rooted problem instituted by a male-based authority and power structure (Kurzman 2022). Specifically, the 1979 Revolution in the country instilled the hardline concept of Shariah law that institutes social laws that place women as subordinates of men in public, the workplace, and at home. Compulsory veiling in public is just one of the many rules and regulations that control and monitor female behavior to achieve decency. Moral police unity is established within the rules to ensure women behave accordingly. Failure to adhere to these laws, especially the dress code, results in arrest and prosecution, often leading to fines or even time in prison for the offenders. Consequently, as demonstrated in the recent FIFA World Cup event, the current protests are designed to uproot and reconstruct Iranian society to achieve equality (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). Several messages, such as “women, life, freedom” and “Down with the Islamic Republic,” provide an indication that the protestors are not just interested in changes in regulations to give women more freedom but also in removing the current leadership and improving the overall freedom of women and the entire population (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). In essence, the protestors are highly radical as the idea is to achieve a total revolution and change the country’s political system from the Islamic Republic to a total democratic republic system based on liberty for the people.

Analysis of the Situation in Iran from a Theoretical Perspective

The radical nature of the protests, as exemplified in the sports event during the WC in Qatar, is directed at the regime. Although it is generally a feminist issue, it has attracted the attention and participation of the majority in the country, including men, as they also realize the need for change and gender equality (Nasirpour, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2022). All the soccer players were male, while the spectators bearing the banners were male and female (Duran 2018). All had the same message- that the world must understand the situation in Iran and support the current efforts the people are using to force radical legal, social, and political changes in the country. In another case, Iranian President Raisi visited the Women's University Alzahara on October 8, 2022, to seek reconciliation with women; he was met with massive protests, with women openly removing their hijab and chanting "murderer" in his direction (Kurzman 2022). The president wanted to pass the narrative that foreign agents and countries were inciting good citizens. Still, protestors rejected these claims as their aim was to remove the regime and replace it with democratic leadership entirely.

The mainstream and social media have played a significant role in the Iranian protests against female discrimination. First, both forms of media were used to share messages about the situation in the country, especially after the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini and the arrest of journalist Niloufar Hamed. Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other social media channels were used to encourage people to participate in the "hijab protests." Nevertheless, the regime later blocked the Internet to contain the protests. Secondly, the media has sensitized the outside world about the situation in the country and the people's grievances, attracting worldwide solidarity. Following the shutdown of the Internet by the regime, people in the country have devised ways to capture pictures and videos of the protests and share them with international media stations, which in turn disseminate the information through global broadcasts. For instance, videos are

sent across borders via digital gadgets and shared with regional broadcasters such as Al Jazeera and international media stations such as BBC, CNN, and others. These efforts have kept the globe updated and aware of the events in the country and the feminist efforts to effect political and social change in Iran (Kurzman 2022). The defiance demonstrated by the Iranians participating in the 2022 FIFA World Cup finals in Qatar is just a mere indication of the situation inside the country. Failure to celebrate goals, refusing to sing the national anthem, and carrying banners calling for a change in the country provide evidence that the regime can no longer control the people's behaviors and the will to expose its failures.



Figure 3. A picture of protests in Iran showing that both men and women are included in the events

It should be noted that the feminist approach to such issues as gender discrimination is not a panacea that is easily applied to reconstruct a society or undo structural power imbalance and neutralize the causes of marginalization and conflicts in a given country (Butler 2020).

Rather, the feminist approach seeks to comprehensively understand a specific problem before acting to cause change through purposeful approaches and using existing and new instruments in a targeted manner. (Butler 2020) Moreover, the feminist approach is not relevant just because women in Iran are taking to the streets in protests but because it is a promising method, given the political and social complexities behind the situation in the country.

Furthermore, most feminist approaches to social problems affecting women and society, in general, start at home, which implies that it is not limited to implementing policies for addressing issues. Instead, it must focus on how these policies are designed and developed. The group of people affected by the policy and whose voice needs to be heard is a relevant issue in this case. In Iran, the feminist approach started with the “hijab protests” after the death of Mahsa. Indeed, the protests were not instigated from outside the country or started by men, as these are not the primary targets of the existing rules on behavior. Noteworthy, the current policies and regulations on behavior adversely and discriminatively target women. Consequently, the protests started when women went to the streets and were later joined by men (Kurzman 2022). Even males knew that the rules and regulations discriminated against their women, but they could not have started the protests because it barely affected them. These are some of the major characteristics of feminist approaches when movements advocating for women’s rights arise in a given country or society.

Conclusion

it is clear that the current protests in Iran are feminist in nature, and the voice of women’s rights in sports fields has been signified during the recently concluded global FIFA event in Qatar. The protests that started after the death of Mahsa were initially designed to force the government to change the veiling policy, but they have since transformed into a full movement

for revolution that is seeking to change the entire political system. The feminist cause has been understood by males as well and has attracted the participation of the majority population in the country.

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