Woman, Life, Freedom: Reconfiguring Feminist Borders in Iranian Feminist Protest

How does the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement reflect an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran?

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Abstract

This study investigates how the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran embodies an evolving transnational feminist praxis, reflecting the intersection of global feminist discourses and locally rooted feminist identities. Grounded in transnational feminism, the research challenges conventional binaries between 'local' and 'global' feminism, particularly as constructed within postmodernist feminist paradigms. Employing frame alignment theory, it conducts a critical discourse analysis of the activism and public narratives of six prominent Iranian feminist figures. By doing so, the study highlights how feminist actors in Iran strategically engage with global feminist currents while navigating the constraints of a theocratic and authoritarian regime. The research reveals the emergence of a hybrid feminist praxis, shaped by transnationalism, global rights discourse, and a shared emphasis on bodily autonomy, creating new spaces of connection and solidarity across borders. In contributing to debates within feminist movement studies, this study underscores the fluidity and adaptability of feminist expression in politically repressive contexts and calls for a re-examination of how feminist movements are framed across borders. Ultimately, it positions the Woman, Life, Freedom movement not merely as a national moment of resistance but as a critical site of global feminist rearticulation.

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List of Abbreviations

WLF	Woman, Life, Freedom
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
HCIWA	High Council of Iranian Women's Advancement
WOI	Woman's Organisation of Iran
RMT	Resource Mobilisation Theory
IO	International Organisation
IGO	Intergovernmental Organisation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa

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CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.1 The Outbreak of Protest in 2022

In the past three years, the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' (WLF) has echoed across global media and appeared on banners in feminist solidarity demonstrations worldwide. In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22 – year – old Kurdish woman from Saqqez, Iranian Kurdistan, was visiting Tehran when she was detained by Iran's morality police for wearing 'improper hijab'. The Iranian morality police are a law enforcement body tasked with enforcing Islamic codes of behaviour in Iran, particularly the wearing of the hijab by women in public spaces (Golkar, 2011,p.208). According to eyewitness accounts, Amini was beaten by the morality police, and taken to Vozara detention centre in Tehran. In police custody, Amini fell into a coma and died three days later, on September 16th, 2022 (Amnesty International, 2023). Journalists Niloofar Hamedi and Elahe Mohamadi posted images of Amini in the hospital and shared an interview with her family, detailing the young woman's mistreatment at the hands of a government - sponsored police force (Tohidi, 2023,p.30). The article subsequently went viral, sparking the largest protest movement in modern Iranian history, led by women. Eighty – two days of nationwide protest occurred in 2022, and the movement continues in smaller forms today. The movement spread across all 31 Iranian provinces, reaching 160 cities and 143 universities (HRANA, 2022), and inciting global solidarity protests in major cities, including London, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Rome, Stockholm, Sydney and Zurich (Guardian, 2022). Soon, three simple words: 'Woman, Life, Freedom' became the rallying cry of protesters across Iran and within diasporic communities around the world. Local concerns about police brutality were then reconfingured into a global call for women's rights and bodily autonomy (Daneshpour and Hassandokht - Firooz, 2022,p.390).

The slogan itself, 'Woman, Life, Freedom' or 'Jin, Jiyan, Azadî' originates from Kurdish revolutionary language and can be traced back to the Kurdish National Liberation Movement in Turkey and the political writings of Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) (Euro News, 2023). Additionally, Iran's mandatory hijab symbolises a long – standing history of political control for Iranian women. Following the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic as a constitutional theocracy, embedding Sharia law into state governance (Roy, 1994, p.168 ; Khalaji , 2011, p.131). This introduced a state enforced Islamic dress code for men and

women in Iran. The hijab, often referring to the traditional black chador, was made compulsory in 1983 under Article 102 of the Law of Islamic Punishments (Ali and Kayall,2023, p.24), making it a public offence for a woman to appear in public without a state–approved hijab. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the clergy's role had been largely confined to religious affairs, but the post – revolutionary era developed a unique strand of religious authoritarianism (Khalaji, 2011, p.131) , creating what Khalaji (2011) describes as a regime of religion "in which the state plays the central banker for symbolic religious capital (Khalaji, 2011, p.131). Within this framework, the hijab, and by extension, the female body, became a state–controlled form of religious capital.

1.2 Iran as a Critical Site for Feminist Mobilisation

The Iranian WLF movement offers an important case for studying transnational feminism, situated at the intersection of local resistance and global feminist discourse, with several features of contemporary Iran creating fertile conditions for transnational feminist mobilisation. Iran's population is eighty–eight million (Moghaddam, 2024,p.135), with nearly 70% of the total population under thirty (Cohen, 2006, p.3). This means that most Iranian protesters during the WLF movement were born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, meaning seventy million Iranians have not voted for the Islamic Republic (Moghaddam, 2024, p.135). Censorship by the Iranian regime restricts access to information about public opinions, making it easy for global audiences to draw false conclusions about Iranian society (Cohen, 2006, p.3) and its capacity to engage with the progressive, transnational feminist momentum. However, 72.8% of all Iranians have access to the internet and social media, via VPN and 95.6 percent have access to a mobile phone (Moghaddam, 2024, p.135), creating a globally connected cyber space. Furthermore, despite common misconceptions, Iranian women are more educated than Iranian men. By 2009, women accounted for 60 percent of Iranian university students (Moghaddam, 2024, p.135). In parallel, Iran's extensive diaspora, with an estimated six to eight million Iranians living abroad (Clingendael, 2023), is an important factor in the global diffusion of Iranian feminist ideas. Operating largely from the West, diaspora feminists maintain close ties with activists inside the country, helping to amplify local struggles and facilitate the global visibility of movements like WLF. Moreover, decades of state violence, mounting economic hardship and growing anti-regime sentiments have shaped a political culture of resistance against the Islamic Republic since its inception in 1979. By 2022, the regime was suffering a legitimacy crisis and a peak in social unrest (Kazemzadeh, 2023, p.119). In many ways, Mahsa Amini's death at the hands of the Islamic

Republic's morality police was "the last straw that broke the proverbial camel's back" (Kazemzadeh, 2023, p.133) for Iranian society. Iran continues to undergo socio–cultural changes that make it fertile ground for transnational feminist mobilisation, with a growing anti – regime sentiment, and boundless horizontal connections.

1.3 Addressing the Research Gap

In an increasingly globalised world, new communications and information technologies (ICTs) have enabled feminists to connect and exchange ideas across borders, raising important questions about whether feminist protests can remain distinctly 'local' in their discourse and resistance or are inevitably shaped by global feminist currents. Considering these debates, this thesis investigates the extent to which the 2022 Iranian WLF movement draws on transnational feminist frameworks in its activist discourse to mobilise support. In doing so, it seeks to challenge the binary between 'local' and 'global' feminist activism, a dichotomy often perpetuated by postmodernist feminist theories, and examines how Iranian feminist actors strategically engage with transnational feminist currents within the constraints of an authoritarian, fundamentalist regime. Existing scholarship on transnational feminist movements largely centres on those arising within stable, democratic contexts (Walder, 2009 ; Amenta et al., 2010 ; Carr, 2018 ; Ghadery, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights, their findings cannot be generalised to mobilisations that emerge under authoritarian or religious fundamentalist regimes such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. This highlights the need to investigate how, and under what conditions, transnational feminist movements emerge within restrictive political contexts. Thus, a key contribution of this thesis is its illumination of both the unique adaptations required to develop a transnational feminist movement under religious authoritarian conditions and the continuities that link such activism to broader global feminist struggles. While postmodern feminists tend to overemphasise local feminist differences in an era of globalisation, this thesis problematises a locational understanding of feminist movements emerging from religious authoritarian regimes.

Through the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the activist discourse of six Iranian feminist activists during the peak of the WLF protests, this thesis asks: How does the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement reflect an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran? For conceptual clarity, the thesis defines a feminist movement as "collective action aimed at improving the status of women or at challenging patriarchy or structures of male domination

and seeking social change that involves transforming societal gender structures" (Weldon et al., 2023, p.2). Although grounded in feminist inquiry, this thesis does not contend that WLF is *exclusively* feminist. While the issue of the mandatory hijab sparked the onset of the movement, 2022's nationwide protests represent an episode in an ongoing resistance against the Islamic Republic, with women's rights serving as the driving force and at the forefront of activism. WLF is a multilayered political movement, encompassing a range of demands including economic pressure, corruption in law enforcement, and unemployment (Rahimi and Rezaei, 2025, p.4). Overall, this thesis identifies four dominant discursive frames within WLF's feminist discourse: (1) Global Rights Frames, (2) Feminist Solidarity Frames, (3) Bodily Autonomy Frames, and (4) Revolutionary Frames.

1.4 Overview of Thesis

Chapter 2 presents a literature review, situating the study within broader debates in social movement scholarship and transnational feminism, before focusing on existing research on the WLF movement. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework, combining thematic coding, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and Snow and Benford's (1986) frame alignment theory. Chapter 4 provides a contemporary history of Iranian feminism, tracing developments from Pahlavi Iran (1925–1979) through to the early stages of the Islamic Revolution (1979–1990s). Chapter 5 examines the global feminist context in which the WLF movement emerged, highlighting trends in digital mobilisation, decentralised activism, and renewed attention to bodily autonomy. Finally, Chapter 6 presents a critical discourse analysis of the activist discourse of six Iranian feminists during the WLF movement, employing a thematic approach to explore how their narratives draw on both global feminist currents and local realities to expand the movement's reach and visibility.

CHAPTER 2
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review considers structural and cultural approaches within social movement research to determine which perspective best supports the aims of this thesis. It then engages with debates within transnational feminist theory to inform the identification of key themes within the corpus. Finally, the review considers existing scholarly debates on the WLF movement. Importantly, scholars continue to debate how social movements should be conceptualised, whether as protests, riots, or movements. This thesis understands WLF through Rucht's (2017) network-based definition of social movements: "a network of individuals, groups, and organisations that, based on a sense of collective identity, seek to bring about social change…primarily by means of collective public protest" (Rucht, 2017, p.45), rather than merely as a riot.

2.2 Approaches in Social Movement Scholarship

Broadly, the social movement field can be grouped into two main approaches: (1) structural approaches and (2) cultural approaches. Structural approaches emphasise the structural conditions that enable mobilisation, highlighting the organisation, resources, and political opportunities available to activists (Jenkins, 1983, p.527). While this approach can produce robust understandings of a movement's emergence or outcomes, it is limited in understanding the political motivations of the activist. Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT), which emerged in the 1970's as the dominant structural framework for analysing social movements, has been applied frequently to the study of women's movements (Staggenborg, 1988 ; Verta, 1989 ; Soule, 1999). RMT is primarily based on the rational actor model, categorising movement participation as a rational response to the evident costs and rewards of participation within a specific social movement (Jenkins, 1983, p. 528). Structural approaches often analyse the quantifiable aspects of a movement, such as the duration, size, location and target, to draw conclusions about the movement's emergence or outcome (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, p.1213). For example, Soule (1999) draws upon both RMT and political opportunity theory to assess the emergence and outcomes of women's collective political action in the US, between 1956 and 1979 (Soule et al., 1999). Through this framework, the protest itself becomes the unit of analysis (Maddison and Shaw, 2012 , p.414), rather than the

participant. RMT's cost–benefit analysis assumes that women will participate in collective action once the perceived rewards outweigh the risks. However, this assumption is limited in contexts such as Iran, where the costs of participation are high, yet the movement still achieves widespread mobilisation. While structural approaches are valuable for producing quantifiable claims about the movement itself, they are limited in analysing the feminist activist and the meanings constructed through activists' behaviours and discourse.

Specifically, this thesis is primarily concerned with the ideological framings produced within activists' public statements, rather than the strength or longevity of the movement; therefore, a cultural approach is more appropriate. The cultural approach encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives, including social constructivist frameworks (Hjelmar, 1996), New Social Movement Theory (Buechler, 1995), and Frame Alignment Theory (Snow et al., 1986). By adopting a cultural perspective, scholars emphasise the role of meaning-making and identity construction in processes of collective action within specific cultural contexts (Hewitt, 2011; Mendes, 2011; Starr, 2017; Mason, 2018; Banas, 2023). Many scholars highlight the symbolic importance of slogans in shaping a movement's meaning and articulating its identity in the public sphere (Majidifard & Noei-Teymori, 2024; Ejaz et al., 2024; Izadi, 2024; Garcia, 2025). More recent contributions have expanded cultural approaches to address the impact of globalisation and digitisation on women's movements, acknowledging the shift of feminist activism to the transnational and digital sphere (Tarrow, 2005; McBride, 2006; Ferree, 2006; Salime, 2014; Youngs, 2015; Baer, 2016; Tohidi, 2018; Vaughan, 2019; Izadi, 2024). Focusing on the MENA region, Moghadam and Gheytanchi (2010) examine how women's rights activists mobilise large – scale movements within nondemocratic and culturally conservative contexts (Moghadam, and Gheytanchi, 2010, p. 267), comparing the cases of Iran and Morocco in their campaigns for family law reform. Similarly, Hewitt (2011) uses a narrative approach and framing theory to examine how contemporary transnational feminist activists employ discursive strategies, particularly rights-based, oppositional, and internally focused frames, to navigate ideological and identity differences (Hewitt, 2011).

Considering this overview, this thesis adopts a cultural approach, using Frame Alignment Theory (Snow et al., 1986) to analyse Iranian feminist discourse during WLF. While structural theories provide valuable insights into the emergence and outcomes of social movements, they often overlook the symbolic and identity-driven dimensions that are

essential for understanding mobilisation in contexts such as Iran. The significance of symbolism and collective identity is particularly evident in WLF, where the personal risks of participation, including the reported killings, torture, sexual assaults, and enforced disappearances of protesters in 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2024) far exceed any immediate benefits of joining the protests. These realities underscore the importance of understanding why participants engage in the feminist struggle and how they articulate its meaning.

2.3 Approaches to Transnational Feminism

Having established the importance of culture and identity in the analysis of WLF, it is necessary to review scholarly approaches to transnational feminism, clarifying its theoretical foundations and the ways in which it manifests in practice. Transnational feminist mobilisation occurs across multiple nations or regions among individuals who "seek to forge a collective identity among women and to improve the condition of women" (Hawkesworth, 2018, p. 35). The term *transnational* carries diverse connotations, rendering its definition somewhat ambiguous. In this thesis, *transnational* refers to "the flows of people, things, images, and ideas across the borders of nation-states in an era of globalisation" (Conway, 2019, p. 43). This study utilises transnational feminism as an analytical approach to identify feminist cross-border organising in practice and discourse (Conway, 2017, p. 205).

The core idea within transnational feminism is the globalisation of feminist ideas, prompting scholars to critically examine how feminist culture is influenced by globalising forces (Mason, 2017, p. 65). Moghadam (2015) argues that the scale of transnational feminist activism since the 1990s is a direct product of globalisation, which she defines as "the mobility of capital, peoples, discourses, products, and organisations [that] takes on an increasingly transnational or global character" (Moghadam, 2015, p. 56). Considering the conditions of globalisation, transnational feminist theorists argue that local and global feminisms "infuse each other thoroughly and cannot be separated" (Desai, 2015, p. 119) and should therefore be analysed as "two interconnected aspects of the same phenomenon" (Mason, 2017, p. 66), rather that distinct ideological forces. According to Tohidi (2017), Iranian feminism embodies a distinctly *glocal* dialectic, referring to the interplay between global feminist currents and local socio-political realities, "whereby local struggles are shaped by, and in turn contribute to, global feminist discourses" (Tohidi, 2017, p. 398).

Two influential strands of transnational feminism are Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (1984) and Grewal and Kaplan's *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994). Mohanty (1984) critiques Western liberal feminism's construction of the 'third world woman' as a "singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 333), highlighting the discursive production of colonialist narratives within Western feminist frameworks. Her approach advocates an anti-colonial perspective that addresses gendered inequalities while acknowledging cultural, social, and global differences (Mohanty, 1984). In contrast, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) challenge the centrality of nation-states in feminist thought. While their approach builds on postmodernist critiques of mainstream feminism and grand feminist narratives (Hegde, 1998, p. 279), it decentres national hegemony and problematises postmodern feminism's strong emphasis on the local–global binary, arguing that local–global differences can be overstated in an era of globalisation. This emphasis on cultural particularism can obscure shared structural oppressions and limit opportunities to recognise cross-border feminist solidarity. Postmodernist conceptions suggest that a local–global binary is indicative of modernity; however, such binary oppositions risk reproducing the outdated "colonialism–nationalism model" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 11), given that modernity itself has historically "participated predominantly within discourses of the formation of nation-states" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 22). In other words, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) caution that overemphasising local differences can reinforce nationalism, which has historically been used to strengthen patriarchal power structures (Herr, 2014, p. 15), as exemplified by the Islamic Revolution and Iran's mandatory hijab. In today's interconnected world, feminist activism increasingly crosses national borders. In this study, this understanding is used to guide the coding and analysis of evidence, allowing for a critical examination of the local–global dynamics in feminist mobilisations, deconstructing a "purely locational politics of global–local" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 13) in feminist mobilisations.

Importantly, transnational feminism does not assume a unidirectional flow of feminist ideas from the West, nor does it imply cultural homogenisation (Mason, 2017, p. 65). Rather, it highlights a complex, "cross-cultural exchange of feminist ideas" (Tohidi & Daneshpour, 2025, p. 1), in which identities are fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated (Hawes-Sivitz, 2012, p. 5). Within this framework, there is no "authentic native" (Chow, 1993, pp. 28–29), and it would be unproductive to locate or wait for an Iranian woman to act as an Iranian woman is 'supposed to act' (Chow, 1993, pp.28 - 29). In this way, transnational feminism addresses the pitfalls of postmodernist feminist approaches, which, by emphasising fixed

national or cultural categories, risk obscuring the ongoing processes of identity negotiation in Iran (Pourmokhtari, 2017, p. 177). Building on these theoretical debates, the following section turns to existing scholarship on the WLF movement.

2.4 Woman, Life, Freedom: A Transnational Movement?

Some scholars have explored the global dimensions of the WLF movement; however, few have placed sustained emphasis on the activist, and discursive practices. Still however, many consider how globalisation has impacted the movements reach and longevity. Still, however, many scholars have considered how globalisation has affected the reach and longevity of WLF (Fazeli, 2023; Moradian, 2024; Mehan, 2024; Vahabli, 2025). Using World Society Theory, Vahabli (2025) analyses how the 2022 WLF movement and the 2019 Bloody November protests in Iran gained global support and media attention. Drawing on Kim and Shahin's (2020) ideological parallelism argument, he contends that domestic protest movements in the Global South, particularly under authoritarian regimes, "will receive more Northern-global attention if they have higher affinity with the global Northern-dominated world society and its definition of human rights" (Vahabli, 2025, p. 325). This approach challenges simplistic binaries between North–South feminisms but leaves space to consider how participants themselves shape and construct these narratives.

Alternatively, Fazeli (2023) situates WLF within a long-standing "cultural conflict between society and the state" (Fazeli, 2023, p. 87), arguing that the Islamic Republic has resisted compromise with the gradual cultural shifts emerging in Iranian society. While the political balance between modern and traditional forces was relatively equal at the Islamic Republic's inception in 1979, it has since tilted in favour of modern forces, due to cultural flows of "feminisation, mediatisation, globalisation… individualisation" (Fazeli, 2023, p. 87). Fazeli frames this as a "new awareness" (Fazeli, 2023, p. 88) incompatible with the regime's fundamentalist ideology. However, his reliance on a tradition–modernity binary risks oversimplifying the lived experience of contemporary Iranian feminists in the lead-up to WLF. Rather than a linear shift from tradition to modernity, women in Iran have historically negotiated between local cultural expectations and global feminist ideals, aligning more closely with Tohidi's notion of a "glocal" feminism (Tohidi, 2017, p. 398). By overlooking Iranian women's historical navigation between the "cultural pressure for authenticity … and the aspiration for individual rights and universal values" (Tohidi, 2017, p. 399), Fazeli's framing risks underplaying the nuanced trajectory of Iranian feminism. Building on these

perspectives, Mehan (2024) emphasises the central role of digital feminist placemaking in WLF, describing it as "Iranian women's creative utilisation of digital platforms to advocate for their rights and promote social change" (Mehan, 2024, p. 2). This echoes Bayat's earlier concept of "the power of presence" (Bayat, 2007, p. 161). By using digital tools to influence physical spaces, Iranian activists have forged new avenues for resistance and activism, circumventing authoritarian constraints (Mehan, 2024).

2.5 Woman, Life, Freedom: A Feminist or Multi - Faceted Movement?

A central debate within the literature concerns whether WLF should be understood primarily as a feminist movement or as a broader, multi-faceted mobilisation with intersecting political, social, and cultural dimensions. Considering this, previous literature has indicated that the centralisation of the female body and the removal of the hijab during WLF signals its feminist core (Afary and Anderson, 2023; Assa, 2023; Mehrabi, 2023; Molana, 2023; Moradian, 2024). For example, Assa (2023) frames the viral resistance tactic of unveiling and cutting hair as a "feminist strike that beckons a revolution" (Assa, 2023, p. 52). Similarly, Mehrabi (2023) argues that cutting one's hair in public constitutes a "symbolic act of resisting modes of sexualisation that are used by the regime to justify the mandatory hijab" (Mehrabi, 2023, p. 114). Consequently, many feminist examinations of WLF identify the removal of the mandatory hijab law as the central demand emerging from the protests (Afary and Anderson, 2023; Molana, 2023; Mehrabi, 2023). Looking beyond these physical acts of resistance, however, Miri (2024) highlights how WLF's central slogans underscore the movement's feminist core. The slogan *"Woman, Life, Freedom"* accentuates the centrality of women more than in previous Iranian movements and "has become the most important slogan of this movement in which women played a significant role in its leadership" (Miri, 2024, p. 186). Importantly, Miri (2024) situates WLF's feminist demands within a broader democratic struggle, arguing that women's leadership emphasises the need for "equal presence of both men and women in the community to establish democracy in the future" (Miri, 2024, p. 192). This indicates that the Iranian feminist struggle is embedded within the democratic one.

Some scholars, however, caution that framing WLF as exclusively feminist risks underestimating the mobilising power of broader socio-political grievances during 2022. This thesis argues that a more accurate analysis identifies feminism as the forefront of a multi-faceted and diverse movement. Piran (2023) warns against "any kind of limiting

conceptualization" (Piran, 2023, p. 91) of the 2022 protests, noting that although Mahsa Amini's death served as the immediate catalyst, the act of unveiling has evolved into a resistance tactic that "laterally connects" (Assa, 2023, p. 60) multiple grievances directed at the Islamic Republic. In this context, removing the hijab symbolises a rejection of affiliation with the regime. Piran's (2023) emphasis on the hijab as a symbol of state power aligns with historical observations in Iranian literature; for example, Afshar (1998) finds that "the only visible sign of Islamification that remains in Iran today is the presence of veiled women" (Afshar, 1998, p. 197). Furthermore, other scholars highlight the diversity of WLF's participants (Daneshpour, 2022; Tohidi, 2023; Monshipouri, 2023; Piran, 2023; Dehghan, 2023; Orazani, 2024). Tohidi (2023) argues that each aspect of Mahsa Amini's identity reflects a grievance within the 2022 protests, noting that "gender and sexuality, ethnicity and religion, and age or generation, all [are] major bases of discrimination subject to layers of oppression by the ruling Shi'a theocracy" (Tohidi, 2023, p. 36). Similarly, Daneshpour and Hassandokht-Firooz (2022) emphasise these lateral connections, observing that the struggle of Iranian women under the Islamic regime is "directly linked to the struggle of all, with the enemy being religious fundamentalism supported by state terror" (Daneshpour & Hassandokht-Firooz, 2022, p. 391). Collectively, these analyses demonstrate that the grievances within Iranian society pre-dating 2022 underscore the complexity of WLF, and the challenges of situating it neatly within any singular theoretical lens, feminist or otherwise.

2.6 Woman, Life, Freedom: Reform or Revolution?

The literature also reflects a debate over whether the WLF movement constitutes a revolutionary challenge to the Islamic Republic, or whether it should be understood more narrowly as a riot (Miri, 2024, p.86). Several recent studies have highlighted the shift in protest aims in Iran, "from reform to revolution" (Ghasseminejad, 2020, p.147; see also Khalili, 2023; Moayer, 2023; Tohidi, 2023). Khalili (2023) argues that the calls for regime change throughout WLF indicate its revolutionary undertones, exemplified by the widespread 2022 slogan, "this is no longer a protest, but the start of a revolution" (Khalili, 2023, p.134). He notes that this slogan contrasts sharply with the 2009 Green Movement, which was characterised primarily by calls for internal democratic reform rather than systemic overhaul, focusing on electoral reform and democratisation (Khalili, 2023, p.134). Similarly, Fazeli (2023) compares previous protests, observing that "in the protests of 1999 and 2009, the demands were political … the protests of 2017, 2019, and 2021 were based on economic demands" (Fazeli, 2023, p.87), in contrast to 2022's calls for regime change. Many scholars

suggest that WLF's revolutionary character stems from the unfulfilled demands of the 2009 Green Movement (Khalili, 2023; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023; Miri, 2024). Khalili (2023) frames the emergence of WLF as "a result of people's disappointment in the possibility of reform in any of the cultural, economic or centralised areas of governance pursued by the Islamic Republic" (Khalili, 2023, p.134). Echoing this perspective, Miri (2024) finds that the WLF movement emerged from "a society that has not been allowed to raise its voice for years… and is now speaking loudly through this movement" (Miri, 2024, p.190). Alternatively, Piran (2023) contends that "every social movement in Iran goes towards a revolutionary movement" (Piran, 2023, p.92), arguing that movements progress from "progressive slogans, and then … to the revolutionary movement and returns to the social movement" (p.92). However, Piran's claim risks overgeneralisation, as it cannot be applied to movements such as the 2009 Green Movement, which articulated specific reformist demands rather than seeking systemic overhaul.

2.7 Conclusion

Although evolving, the current literature on feminist social movements predominantly focuses on overt resistance within relatively stable and democratic societies, offering limited insight into how feminist activism unfolds under conditions of political repression and social constraint. Feminist collective action in Iran is frequently met with violent state repression, rendering conventional frameworks insufficient for explaining such forms of resistance. Existing literature on WLF is valuable in situating the movement within Iran's long history of protest and in highlighting its multi-faceted demands and revolutionary character. However, much of this scholarship focuses primarily on the movement's visible acts of resistance and widespread slogans, without examining the discourses and narratives constructed by activists themselves. This leaves space for further exploration of how participants experience, shape, and articulate the movement from within.

CHAPTER 3

Methodological Approach

3.1 Research Question and Purpose of Study

This chapter outlines the three methodological tools employed in this thesis: (1) purposive sampling, (2) thematic coding, and (3) critical discourse analysis (CDA) combined with Frame Alignment Theory (Snow et al., 1986). Section 3.2 details the data collection process and the selection criteria for both activists and discourse sources. Section 3.3 describes the thematic coding procedures undertaken, while Section 3.4 presents CDA as the primary analytical approach, and Frame Alignment Theory (Snow et al., 1986) as a theoretical framework. These methods are designed to address the research question: How does the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement reflect an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran?

Using Google's advanced search tool, key terms were selected to retrieve a relevant corpus: "Woman, Life, Freedom" + "activist name." All retrieved documents were required to contain all search terms to ensure relevance. The search was limited to the period from 13 September 2022 to 13 October 2023, encompassing the initial arrest of Mahsa Amini through to the one-year anniversary of her death. This timeframe captures both immediate discursive responses to the triggering event and reflective perspectives on the protests and their aftermath. For each of the six activists, the top ten sources retrieved were purposefully sampled to prioritise the most frequently accessed materials. These were further narrowed to two sources per activist based on their level of detail and theoretical relevance.

Employing CDA in conjunction with Frame Alignment Theory (Snow et al., 1986), this thesis identifies the major themes within Iranian feminist activism during the WLF movement. Particular attention is paid to how prominent Iranian feminists negotiate the tension between global feminist currents and locally specific struggles under an authoritarian, fundamentalist regime, assessing whether their discourse reflects an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute to broader debates within transnational feminist scholarship by examining how feminist activists articulate and navigate cross-border feminist frameworks in practice.

These research aims are guided by the following sub – questions:

1. What has been the traditional approach to feminist activism in Iran since the Pahlavi Era?
2. What are the current global trends in transnational feminist activism?
3. To what extent do prominent Iranian feminists engage with global feminist currents in their activist discourse?
4. What does this reveal about the evolution of feminist activism under conditions of authoritarian constraint and globalisation?

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Activist Collection

The selection of the six activists was achieved through purposive sampling. The relatively small sample size of six was intentional, allowing for in-depth analysis of activist discourse within the constraints of a 25,000-word limit, thereby maximising understanding of the discourse (Miles, 1994; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling does not require randomisation to select a sample from the total population, in this case, Iranian feminist activists. Instead, subjective selection methods are prioritised to control which elements are included in the sample (Etikan, 2015, p.1).

The activists included in this thesis were identified based on the significance of their contributions to the WLF movement's feminist discourse and their relevance to the study's research aims. The following criteria guided their selection: (1) the individual resides in Iran or is a member of the Iranian diaspora; (2) the individual has made direct reference to the WLF movement on at least five occasions between 13th September 2022 and 13th October 2023; (3) the individual has self-identified as an activist; and (4) the individual is recognised as a leader within the WLF movement or the broader Iranian feminist movement. Leadership was determined based on evidence of influence and visibility, including substantial social media engagement or following (>10,000 followers), invitations to speak at prominent events or international forums, and authorship of widely circulated statements or publications.

Importantly, the boundaries of the Iranian feminist population are not easily defined, as many individuals do not explicitly adopt the label ‘feminist’. A random sample would therefore risk inaccuracy due to the blurred lines of the Iranian feminist cohort. Accordingly, the thesis did not require activists to explicitly identify as feminist, but rather to disseminate feminist ideas. This approach aligns with Sperling’s (2001) argument that feminist action can be defined as “that in which the participants explicitly place value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women’s social status, whether they adopt or reject the feminist label” (Sperling, 2001, p.1158). Given the significant political risk associated with openly identifying as a feminist in Iran, many activists engage in feminist-oriented actions without publicly embracing the term. This broader definition enables the study to capture the complex and often covert nature of feminist activism within the WLF movement.

Initially, the sampling process identified a cohort of 12 relevant activists. However, this number did not allow for sufficient depth of analysis within the constraints of the 25,000-word limit. Therefore, the final six activists were selected based on how “information-rich” their sources were (Patton, 2002, p.46). In this thesis, information-rich records are defined as content that reflects the specifically feminist elements of WLF, provides detailed opinion, and addresses the movement’s aims (Spradley, 2016, p.46). This approach facilitated the exclusion of data lacking substantive analytical value.

While some CDA studies employ probability sampling, which can produce more generalisable results by ensuring each activist “has a known, nonzero probability of being included in the sample” (Henry, 1990, p.25) and mitigate researcher bias, purposive sampling was considered more appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, Miles and Huberman (1994) note that feminist ideology has a layered logic and coherence “that random sampling can reduce to uninterpretable sawdust” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.27). Less concerned with statistical significance, purposive sampling prioritises the selection of participants who provide a diverse and representative range of perspectives (Brians, 2017, p.143). However, given the use of purposive sampling, the findings cannot be generalised beyond the population of prominent Iranian activists.

Importantly, Johnston (2002) argues that “the discourse produced by intellectuals and movement leaders is taken as representative of organisational discourse” (Johnston, 2002, p.68). Similarly, Rochon (1998) finds that leadership-level discourse often reflects ideas that resonate across the broader movement, as subordinate levels within a movement draw on this

discourse, and leaders "reflect the essential elements of broader discourses" (Johnston, 2002, p.68). Accordingly, analysing the discourse of prominent activists provides valuable insight into the most influential and widely disseminated forms of feminist activism within the WLF movement, enhancing the significance of the findings.

Following a background search guided by the selection criteria, six prominent activists were selected for this study, three residing in Iran and three from the Iranian diaspora. Triangulating perspectives from both domestic and diaspora activists was essential to provide comparative insights into differing approaches to Iranian feminist activism. Their perspectives on the WLF movement are well-documented and accessible through reputable international media outlets offering English translations, ensuring that the source material is both reliable and readily available for analysis.

Masih Alinejad

Masih Alinejad is one of the most prominent feminist voices challenging Iran's compulsory hijab law. Forced into exile during the 2009 Green Movement, she now operates from the US, leveraging her position to connect domestic and diaspora activism. In 2014, she launched *My Stealthy Freedom* (Oslo Freedom Forum, 2025), a Facebook group enabling Iranian women to share images of themselves removing their headscarves. This initiative evolved into transnational campaigns such as #WhiteWednesdays, advocating for gender-based freedom of choice, and became the largest movement opposing compulsory hijab laws in Iran prior to WLF (My Stealthy Freedom, 2019). The campaign's social media platforms now reach over ten million people, with more than seven million followers, 80% residing inside Iran (My Stealthy Freedom, 2019). Alinejad's role as a diaspora activist who effectively bridges domestic and international networks makes her particularly relevant for this study. Her leadership in transnational feminist online activism positions her at the intersection of local and global feminist movements, providing a unique perspective for examining how diaspora actors navigate cultural and political boundaries in the context of WLF.

Shirin Ebadi

Former Iranian judge and human rights advocate Shirin Ebadi was selected for her historically grounded and internationally recognised feminist advocacy. As the first Iranian, and the first woman from the Muslim world, to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003,

Ebadi is a globally recognised feminist trailblazer. Born in 1947, she has witnessed and participated in key moments of Iran's feminist history, from the 1979 International Women's Day protests to the 2022 WLF movement, providing a historically informed perspective on the evolution of feminist activism in Iran. Her inclusion contributes generational diversity to the sample, enriching the study with a longitudinal understanding of feminist experiences. Since 2009, she has continued her advocacy from the diaspora in London, maintaining an active role in global discussions on women's rights in Iran.

Nazanin Boniadi

Actress and feminist activist Nazanin Boniadi was born in Tehran in 1980, shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and was subsequently relocated to London. At the age of twelve, she experienced a confrontation with Iran's morality police, a formative event that personally connected her to the realities of gender-based repression in Iran (People, 2022). Boniadi has since become internationally prominent as an activist and has leveraged her global platform to advocate for women's rights and broader human rights in Iran, particularly challenging compulsory hijab laws. Her inclusion in this study is justified by her dual identity as both a cultural figure and activist, which positions her as a significant transnational voice. Boniadi exemplifies how diaspora actors with cultural visibility can amplify feminist advocacy to shape international perceptions of the WLF movement.

Narges Mohammadi

Narges Mohammadi was selected for her unique position as a political prisoner in Tehran's Evin Prison, where she was awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize for her "fight against the oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights and freedom for all" (Nobel Peace Prize, 2023). This recognition has amplified her voice globally, resulting in a substantial body of English-translated communications that mitigate the usual access issues caused by censorship in Iran. Currently imprisoned for "spreading propaganda" (BBC, 2023), a common consequence of articulating feminist ideas under the Islamic Republic, Mohammadi continues to engage through letters and interviews with international media. Her activism offers a "glocal" perspective (Tohidi, 2017, p.398), producing global feminist discourse from within Iran's authoritarian context while navigating local resistance through transnational outreach.

Bahareh Hedayat

Bahareh Hedayat is a prominent former student activist, widely recognised for her leading role in Iran's One Million Signatures campaign, a grassroots initiative aimed at ending legal gender discrimination in Iran (Amnesty International, 2025). Her inclusion in this study is significant because it highlights her experience with legally grounded, state-directed activism, while her engagement in the 2022 WLF movement reflects a shift toward revolutionary demands, mirroring broader trends among frustrated Iranian feminists. As a member of the Central Committee of the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, a national student organisation advocating political reform and opposing human rights violations, Hedayat has consistently been at the forefront of activism (Amnesty International, 2025). Arrested during the WLF protests, she is currently serving a ten-year sentence in Evin Prison.

Fatemeh Sepehri

Fatemeh Sepehri was selected as a feminist activist who was arrested during the 2022 WLF protests, providing firsthand insight into the movement on the ground. At 60 years old, she is a longstanding critic of Iran's mandatory hijab law and is currently imprisoned for "spreading falsehood, disturbing public opinions through social media activities and presence in media outside Iran" (USCIRF, 2025). Notably, Sepehri once embodied the Islamic Republic's ideal as a "veiled woman, the widow of a war martyr, and the member of a war martyr's family" (NIAC, 2025). Her transition into feminist activism reflects significant personal sacrifice and offers a unique perspective on advancing feminist ideals within a traditional framework. Sepehri participated in the protests but was arrested following an interview with Voice of America Farsi in which she discussed the demonstrations. Like Mohammadi and Hedayat, she has continued to support the movement from prison, disseminating voice notes and letters to encourage protestors (NIAC, 2025).

3.2.2 Discourse Collection

To examine the feminist activism of the six prominent feminists, this study employs two empirical sources: (1) relevant secondary literature, examined in Chapters 4 and 5, and (2) activist discourse records, examined in Chapter 6. Chapters 4 and 5 are informed by a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, including journal articles, book chapters, and

reports from non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which provide relevant statistics. Sources were identified through a combination of database searches on Google Scholar and reference chaining from key academic texts.

The corpus of activist discourse analysed in Chapter 6, presented in Table 1, was collected primarily through purposive sampling using Google's advanced search engine. The two principal units of analysis were (1) the activist and (2) the activist's discourse. Discourse documents were drawn exclusively from sources that were "internally generated and internally directed by the individual" (Brians et al., 2017, p.194), meaning content directly authored by the activists themselves. Mediated sources, in which statements were paraphrased or interpreted by others, were excluded to preserve the activists' original intentions and minimise platform bias. Consequently, secondary sources were used only when the original document was attached, ensuring the original meaning of the discourse was preserved.

Table 1. Total Corpus

Activist	Source	Date	Local/Diaspora	Notes
Masih Alinejad	Panel Statement	25/11/2022	Diaspora	Statement at Global Women's Summit with Washington Post
Masih Alinejad	Interview	09/03/2023	Diaspora	Interview with MSNBC on International Women's Day
Shirin Ebadi	Interview	06/10/2022	Diaspora	Interview with +972 Magazine
Shirin Ebadi	Speech	02/11/2022	Diaspora	Speech at the UN Security Council Meeting on WLF
Nazanin Boniadi	Speech	10/10/2023	Diaspora	Speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum

Nazanin Boniadi	Speech	16/11/2022	Diaspora	Speech at the Academy Women's Luncheon
Narges Mohammadi	Letter	06/10/2023	Local	Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Statement from Evin Prison
Narges Mohammadi	Letter	01/07/2023	Local	Letter from Evin Prison, Shared with CNN
Bahareh Hedayat	Letter	14/07/2023	Local	Letter From Evin Prison, Shared with Iran Wire
Bahareh Hedayat	Letter	01/12/2022	Local	Letter from Evin Prison, Shared with Iran Wire
Fatemeh Sepehri	Interview	16/09/2022	Local	Interview with Iran International
Fatemeh Sepehri	Interview	20/09/2022	Local	Interview with Voice of America Farsi

Given the sensitive and constrained position of Iranian feminists, this thesis prioritised the use of publicly available materials that participants had already consented to share in the public domain. Original data collection through interviews was avoided due to practical constraints and ethical considerations. In accordance with the University of Nottingham's ethical guidelines on vulnerable populations (University of Nottingham, 2023), directly approaching participants in the WLF movement was deemed impermissible, as their political engagement places them at significant risk of harm. This approach mitigates ethical concerns while preserving access to rich, self-authored content that reflects the participants' perspectives without compromising their safety.

The use of multiple source types allows for source triangulation, enabling “cross-data validity checks” (Patton, 1999, p.1192; Morgan, 2022, p.65) and reducing bias that might emerge from single-perspective models. Triangulation also captures the diverse channels through which Iranian feminists communicate. This study further recognises that the purpose and rhetorical context of sources vary and therefore attends to the specific context of each document to ensure that speaker intent and audience are considered in analysis (Patton, 1999, p.1195).

Discourse sources were selected according to a strict sampling frame, defined by McEnery and Hardie (2012) as “a definition, or set of instructions, for the samples to be included in a corpus” (McEnery and Hardie, 2011, p.250). Using Google’s advanced search tool, key terms were applied in the format: “Woman, Life, Freedom” + “activist name,” with all documents required to include both terms in this order to ensure relevance. The search was restricted to 13th September 2022 – 13th October 2023, corresponding with Mahsa Amini’s arrest and the first anniversary of her death, to capture both immediate responses and reflective commentary on this catalytic event.

A preliminary search (Creswell, 2016) retrieved sixty documents, ten per activist. The top ten sources per activist were purposefully sampled to prioritise the most frequently accessed sources and stored in clearly labelled Excel files. Following ethical approval from the University of Nottingham (2023), two sources per activist were selected for detailed analysis. Selection was guided by information richness, prioritising documents that directly addressed the WLF movement and its feminist dimensions, including the mandatory hijab and broader women’s rights issues. Preference was given to sources containing qualitative insights, such as opinions and reflections, rather than purely statistical or descriptive content.

3.3 Thematic Coding

A two-stage qualitative coding process was employed in this thesis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2024) six analytical stages: “(1) data familiarisation; (2) data coding; (3) generating initial themes; (4) reviewing and developing themes; (5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and (6) writing the report” (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p. 390). First, the dataset underwent open coding to identify recurring patterns, variations, and emerging themes across the sources. This process began with the selection of information-rich quotations, defined as opinionated statements specifically addressing the feminist elements of WLF. These quotations were then organised into broad thematic categories. Memos facilitated the

identification of initial themes, which were subsequently labelled with code labels (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p. 393), as a snapshot illustrates in Table 2. This approach provided an effective transitional process between data collection and analysis, supported by memo writing throughout the coding stage.

Table 2. Initial Code Labels with Exemplars

Code Label	Example Context	Memos
Feminism = Democracy	*freedom; equality; justice; women's rights; democracy*	Feminism positioned as essential for democratic transformation.
Hijab = Revolution	*veil; revolution; freedom; uprising; liberation*	Mandatory hijab removal framed as symbolic of broader revolutionary aims.
Global Solidarity	*sisters; solidarity; global struggle; shared fight; international*	Recognition of shared struggle within a global feminist community.

The first coding stage employed an inductive approach, allowing research findings to "emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data" (Thomas, 2006, p.238). This strategy was prioritised to allow the data to speak for itself, rather than imposing pre-selected categories typical of structural approaches. The purpose of open coding was to assign interpreted meaning to individual data segments, facilitating the later identification of patterns and themes across the dataset (Saldana, 2016, p.4). However, the contextual knowledge of Iranian and global feminist trends, as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5, informed subsequent rounds of coding. This ensured that, while the initial coding was inductive, findings could be categorised in relation to the feminist trends established in Chapters 4 and 5, creating coding categories grounded in both contextual and theoretical knowledge and raw data (Johnston, 2002, p.69). Consequently, the coding process was not entirely "goal-free" (Scriven, 1991, p.181); its objective was to identify how activists employed discourse to articulate the feminist dimensions of the WLF movement.

Overall, the coding process involved multiple rounds to refine codes, develop sub-codes, and identify the most information-rich features of the data for interpreting meaning and building

theory (Saldana, 2016, p.9). Once refined, the selected quotations were stored in a searchable Excel spreadsheet, organised by activist, date, source type, coded theme, and local or diaspora origin. This structure facilitated efficient retrieval of transcripts and quotations and supported accurate thematic comparisons. Importantly, code frequencies were manually counted rather than relying solely on automated platforms such as NVivo. As Johnston (2002) notes, textual data are "contextually embedded and are often gathered in ways that offer insights into their interpretation that are lost in survey techniques" (Johnston, 2002, p.69). Manual counting was necessary for accuracy due to the nuanced and context-dependent nature of Iranian feminist discourse. For example, many Iranian feminists, particularly those within Iran, do not explicitly use the label "feminist" because of associated risks. Automated coding platforms may overlook such expressions or misclassify terms such as "democracy" or "freedom" when they appear outside explicitly feminist objectives, potentially introducing irrelevant data into the analysis.

3.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

This study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines how language functions as a tool for producing and negotiating social and cultural positions and identities (Gee, 2014). In social movement studies, discourse often encompasses newspaper articles, political speeches, slogans, and manifestos (Johnston, 2002, p.67). The discursive field for this study comprises letters, interviews, and statements from six prominent feminist activists during WLF. The term "critical" in CDA highlights the examination of both explicit and implicit power relations and ideologies embedded within discourse (Toolan, 1997, pp.85–86). Discourse and ideology are central to CDA, which seeks not only to describe language but to uncover underlying power dynamics and hidden meanings. For Potter and Wetherell (1990), the goal of discourse analysis is to explore the "functional orientation of language" and the "constructive processes" shaping its use (Potter and Wetherell, 1990, pp.207–212). In their view, the focus should be placed on how subjects draw upon discourse according to "their suitability to an immediate context'' (Potter and Wetherell, 1990, p.212). Therefore, discourse is not treated as neutral but contextually embedded, making CDA a suitable lens for analysing how WLF activists deployed feminist discourses in response to the movement's demands and the specific socio-political context of Iran.

This study utilised Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional CDA model. According to Fairclough (1992), discourse can be analysed at three levels: the micro level, concerned with linguistic features such as vocabulary and rhetoric; the meso level, which focuses on how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed; and the macro level, which situates discourse within wider social and political contexts (Fairclough, 1992, pp.62–73). What distinguishes Fairclough's approach is its emphasis on "existing social realities as humanly produced constraints" (Fairclough, 2023, pp.40–41), focusing on why social realities are produced. He illustrates this perspective by noting that "it is one thing to critique people's language and practices on the grounds that they are racist, but another thing to explain why and how racism emerges amongst certain people in certain circumstances" (Fairclough, 2023, pp.40–41). In this sense, the activists' language choices can be understood not only as locally situated but also as strategically drawing upon established strands of feminist discourse.

While CDA offers clear advantages for this study, its limitations must be acknowledged. Sunderland (2004) argues that Fairclough's (1992) approach overstates the distinction between description and interpretation, noting that by describing a text, the researcher is already subjecting it to interpretation, and thus to interpretive bias (Sunderland, 2004, p.47). Wodak (2023) suggests that the description and interpretation stages in CDA should be kept separate, "enabling transparency and reproduction of the respective analysis" (Wodak, 2023, p.45). Considering this, the thesis remains reflective in its descriptions by acknowledging its feminist lens and recognising that this focus shapes the labelling of texts. Furthermore, some CDA approaches risk overextending the speaker's original intentions. Parker (1990) argues that "to describe what texts mean, we are elaborating discourses that go beyond individual intentions" (Parker, 1990, p.193) and extending activists' words beyond their immediate context risks distorting their intended meaning (Steinberg, 2002, p.208). In this study, the researcher recognises that political activist discourse may be "specifically designed, for a purpose, whether it be description, persuasion, or exhortation" (Brians et al., 2017, p.204).

Finally, Van Dijk (2001) contends that a complete discourse analysis is "totally out of the question" in practice (Van Dijk, 2001, p.99), as the complexity of discourse, spanning texts, contexts, and social practices, makes it impossible for any single study to exhaustively analyse every dimension. However, exhaustive coverage is not always necessary, particularly when a study aims for depth on a specific aspect of text or social phenomena. This research purposefully samples texts, seeking depth rather than generalisability. While future studies

could benefit from examining the global reception of these activist discourses, such a wide scope exceeds the time and labour constraints of this thesis. Overall, CDA is applied inductively to examine how Iranian feminist activists construct meaning, articulate demands, and mobilise support. Frame alignment theory serves as the central theoretical framework, guiding the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns, or "frames," within the discourse. By combining CDA with frame alignment theory, this study systematically uncovers how activists' position WLF in relation to global feminist currents, local realities, and broader political struggles, allowing for analysis of both what is being said and how it is strategically communicated to shape perception and mobilise action.

3.5 Frame Alignment Theory

Frame alignment refers to "the linkage of individual and Social Movement Organisation's (SMO) interpretive orientations" (Snow et al., 1986, p.464), whereby individuals' interests, values, and beliefs are brought into alignment with the goals, activities, and ideology of the SMO. Broadly, Snow et al. (1986) argue that social movements derive meaning through frames, and that the alignment of these frames is a necessary condition for the effective mobilisation of a support base (Snow et al., 1986, p.464).

Within this theory, there are four types of frame alignment: "(a) frame bridging, (b) frame amplification, (c) frame extension, and (d) frame transformation" (Snow et al., 1986, p.467). Frame bridging refers to "the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem" (Snow et al., 1986, p.465), connecting ideologically compatible but previously unconnected frames around a particular political issue. In other words, it occurs when a movement links its own frame to other sympathetic but separate groups or discourses that share similar values or beliefs, without the groups having previously been formally connected. The purpose of frame bridging is to expand the potential support base by demonstrating how the movement's cause resonates with existing concerns or ideologies in other groups.

Next, frame amplification refers to the "invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events. Because the meaning of events and their connection to one's immediate life situation are often shrouded by indifference, deception or fabrication by others" (Snow et al., 1986, p.469). The idea is that people may not immediately see how an issue relates to them because its meaning is unclear, misrepresented, or obscured. By

amplifying values already present within a group, activists make the frame more salient to individuals who may have previously misunderstood the movement, its grievances, or its objectives.

Sometimes, however, activists may need to do more than overcome ambiguity to mobilise participants; this is where frame extension becomes useful. Some social movements may appear to have little relevance or impact on the potential adherents they are attempting to recruit. In such cases, activists may "extend the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents" (Snow et al., 1986, p.472).

Finally, frame transformation occurs when the social movement "may not resonate with, and on occasion may even appear antithetical to conventional lifestyles or rituals and extant interpretive frames" (Snow et al., 1986, p.473). In such cases, activists may introduce new values to transform existing meanings and garner support. In other words, rather than merely linking existing beliefs to a cause or emphasising certain values, frame transformation encourages people to adopt a new worldview entirely.

Using frame alignment theory, this study can systematically examine how WLF activists construct meaning, mobilise support, and connect local and transnational audiences through discourse.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Firstly, there are significant risks associated with publicly criticising the Islamic Republic, particularly for feminists residing within Iran. Accordingly, only discourse documents that had already been widely disseminated, such as interviews on *Washington Post Live* or MSNBC, were used, ensuring that activists had clearly intended their messages for broad circulation. For imprisoned activists, letters and statements were included only when consent for publication was evident.

To minimise availability bias and potential misinterpretation, both Western and locally based media outlets were consulted. Furthermore, during data collection, interviews for Fatemeh Sepehri, sourced from Voice of America Farsi and Iran International, were only available in Iranian Farsi. While Google Translate provided an initial translation, the nuances of Farsi

expressions can be lost or distorted in automated translation to English. To ensure accuracy and preserve meaning, a fluent Farsi speaker from Durham University was contacted to produce a transcript, which was then cross-checked against the automated translation for reliability.

Finally, although a larger data cohort was possible, many available documents fell outside the defined protest period or addressed feminism and democratic reform more broadly rather than the WLF movement specifically. Only two relevant sources were available for Fatemeh Sepehri; to maintain balance across activists and avoid bias, each activist was therefore limited to two documents. To preserve contextual validity and analytical precision, this study focused on a smaller, carefully selected set of documents produced during the active protest period and explicitly centred on WLF feminist discourse.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological framework employed to investigate whether the WLF movement reflects an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran. The discourse documents analysed included letters, interviews, and speeches, spanning 13th September 2022 to 13th October 2023, from diaspora activists Masih Alinejad, Shirin Ebadi, and Nazanin Boniadi, as well as local activists Narges Mohammadi, Bahareh Hedayat, and Fatemeh Sepehri.

Before presenting the empirical analysis, two chapters, Chapter 4: A Contemporary History of Iranian Feminism and Chapter 5: Iranian Feminism in a Globalising Landscape, provide important context for understanding WLF. Chapter 4 offers a modern history of Iranian feminism, highlighting how feminist activism in Iran has historically been shaped by shifting state ideologies. The shared history of bodily control is central to understanding the feminist identity of the contemporary WLF movement. Chapter 5 examines the contemporary global feminist landscape in which WLF emerged, highlighting the international feminist currents available to Iranian feminists in 2022.

CHAPTER 4
A Contemporary History of Iranian Feminism

4.1 Introduction

This chapter traces the modern history of Iranian feminism from Pahlavi Iran (1925–1979) to the early stages of the Islamic Revolution (1979–1990s). The chapter is divided into two sections. The first examines the Pahlavi regime's modernisation agenda, focusing on state-controlled feminism and the 1936 unveiling decree as instruments of top-down reform. The second explores the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, analysing the state-led rollback of women's rights, women's participation in resistance movements, including the March 8th, 1979, Women's Day march, and the emergence of post-Islamist and Islamic feminist discourses. These themes highlight how feminist activism in Iran has historically been shaped by shifting state ideologies, whether through Western-inspired modernisation or religious conservatism. In both periods, women's rights were contingent on state objectives, rendering feminist progress dependent on official sanction rather than independent mobilisation. This shared history of control and negotiation is crucial for understanding the contemporary WLF movement, illuminating why Iranian feminist activism expanded beyond the nation-state in 2022–2023.

Two critical junctures in the history of Iranian feminism:
1936 - Reza Shah issues *Kashf – e hijab*
1979 - Ayatollah Khomeini announces the mandatory veil in Iran

4.2 Reza Shah and The Women's Awakening Project (1936 – 1941)

The Shah's Women's Awakening Project was the first government initiative in Iran to explicitly link women's socio-economic status with state legitimacy (Amin, 2002, p.247). In the late 1800s to early 1900s, emerging political powers adopted Western socio-economic and cultural models as part of broader modernisation efforts (Jalili, 2020, p.264). National sovereignty became closely tied to "now universalised political and cultural standards" (Marashi, 2003, p.105), grounded in modern and democratic norms. These norms were regarded as the "prescriptive representational forms in which emerging states sought to cloak themselves in order to achieve recognition by the international system" (Marashi, 2003,

p.105). Consequently, debates surrounding the Islamic veil began to emerge, often shaped by colonial narratives that depicted it as a symbol of backwardness and oppression (Jalili, 2020, p.264).

4.2.1 Mandatory Unveiling Under Reza Shah

The modernisation agenda was most visibly enforced through Reza Shah's 1936 Kashf-e-hijab decree, which mandated the removal of the face veil and the Iranian chador, both traditional forms of Islamic veiling (Rostam-Kolayi, 2003, p.173). Through this policy, Reza Shah sought to position unveiled Iranian women as visible markers of national progress and state-led modernisation, aligning women with Western ideals of modernity. Moradi (2023) argues that Kashf-e-hijab introduced "a new era of biopolitics" (Moradi, 2023, p.1130) in Iran, in which women's bodies were politicised to represent the ideological agenda of the ruling regime. Reza Shah's politicisation of the veil continues to inform Iranian feminist activism, with WLF participants appropriating it as a site of resistance to contest the authority of the Islamic Republic.

Notably, in a 1936 speech in Tehran about Kashf-e-hijab, the Shah stated: "my sisters and daughters, now that you have entered society … know that your duty is to work for your homeland" (Kashani-Sabet, 2005, p.42). Although the state portrayed unveiling as a liberatory act, women's participation in the public sphere remained conditional. Access to education, employment, and public services was contingent on compliance with a state-imposed dress code. In this way, state-led 'reforms' not only appropriated women's progress and activism but also repressed grassroots feminist expressions that did not align with the regime's vision of modernity. For example, several eyewitness accounts describe how government officials would "break into private homes or search door-to-door and arrest women wearing chadors in the privacy of their homes" (Sedghi, 2007, p.87), supplementing bans on public spaces for those not complying with the dress code.

Following Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, Kashf-e-hijab was temporarily removed. However, under Mohammad Reza Shah, women's choice in dress generally depended on their family and regional traditions within Iran (Jalili, 2020, p.269).

4.2.2 Gender Reform Under Reza Shah

Between 1925 and 1941, women's progress was largely shaped by top-down reform, particularly in education and legal rights. Girls' education expanded rapidly, with girls' enrolment in elementary and secondary schools increasing more than boys, rising from 16.9 percent in 1922–23 to 28.0 percent in 1941–42 (Khaki, 2015, p.48). Solidifying this progress, Reza Shah founded a Ladies Society (kanun-e-banuvan) in Iran following his visit to Turkey in 1934 (Khaki, 2015, p.48), which promoted growth in education for Iranian girls.

Despite divides between secular and traditional women, Iranian women widely agreed on matters of education and reforms on marriage and divorce laws. Those who had advocated for marriage and divorce law reforms did so "in conformity with the reforming spirit of Islam" (Najmabadi, 2000, p.40). To some extent, this created solidarity across progressive and traditional women, because the reforms were considered acceptable in Islam. However, the 1936 unveiling policy ultimately served to re-instate divisions and limited the effects of reform for many traditional women. For Najmabadi (2000), following Kashf-e-hijab, "an unbridgeable chasm opened up among women" (Najmabadi, 2000, p.39) on the topic of unveiling, where it was impossible to build a consensus surrounding women's advancement. Girls from traditional families were kept home, and female teachers who did not wish to unveil resigned or were dismissed from their positions. This created space for the advancement of women who conformed to the state dress code, and the neglect of non-conforming women. Consequently, schools were absent of "women who would not (or could not, if forbidden by fathers, brothers, or husbands) unveil" (Najmabadi, 2000, p.40).

Therefore, state-led progression, rather than strengthening a women's movement in Iran, deepened divisions among women, as feminism and reform came to be associated with middle-class, secular women. This dynamic positioned traditional, often working-class Persian women as in need of "the guidance and enlightenment of their Western and 'modern' (often privileged) Iranian sisters" (Naghibi, 2007, pp.74–75). Thus, the state's top-down, secularised model of women's progress functioned, as Wadud (2019) argues, as "a tool to divide Muslim women and pit them against each other for who controls the terrain of advocacy and progress" (Wadud, 2019, p.34), did not support the development of a unified grassroots feminist movement in Pahlavi Iran.

4.3 State - Sponsored Women's Organisations

A top–down form of feminism continued under Reza Shah, beginning with the repression of independent women's groups. For instance, the Patriotic Women's League, established in 1922, was banned by the government in 1932. In 1934, it was replaced with the Women's Center (Kanoon-e Banavan) (Sedghi, 2007, p.83). The Women's Center was "one of the first women's organisation[s] to hold a close relationship with the government" (Iran Chamber, 1996), and was heavily controlled by the Shah's modernist agenda, becoming increasingly charity-orientated rather than inherently feminist. The Women's Center actively campaigned against kafan–e siah, a pejorative term for the black chador, and provided the "organisational apparatus for propagating the idea of unveiling and its implementation" (Sedghi, 2007, p.83).

Many scholars examining women's rights in Pahlavi Iran often conflate state-controlled reforms with a lack of grassroots feminist activism. As Kia (2005) observes, scholarship tends to draw a line between "institutionally independent activism and activism through the state, and the former is lauded at the expense of the latter" (Kia, 2005, p.228). The assumption that only activism independent of the state constitutes evidence of a feminist momentum risks overlooking, or even erasing, the longevity and significance of women's activism in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution. In practice, as women grew increasingly disillusioned with state-controlled reforms, feminist activism did not subside; instead, it adapted to the constraints of state-controlled reforms to continue advancing their goals. In 1959, the Shah formed the High Council of Iranian Women's Associations (HCIWA), a "conglomeration of seventeen women's organisations" (Tajuddin, 2000, p.161), designed to absorb independent women's groups to prevent the formation of an independent feminist movement in Iran (Tajuddin, 2000, p.161). Although the state co-opted independent feminist activism, such activism continued to adapt to these restrictive conditions rather than diminish entirely. The HCIWA was renamed the Women's Organisation of Iran (WOI) in 1966 and was headed by the Shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf. The long – term resilience of the organisation suggests that, rather than disappearing, feminist activism in Pahlavi Iran strategically navigated state structures, with women adapting to co-opted institutions to continue pursuing their aims. This trend aligns with broader feminist scholarship on restrictive contexts. Heng (1996) argues that under conditions of political threat, third–world feminisms have at times responded, "to assume the nationalist mantle itself" (Heng, 1996,

p.34). In the context of Pahlavi Iran, this suggests that grassroots feminists may have strategically collaborated with state-mandated women's organisations to advance their objectives, working alongside the Shah where possible. Such collaboration reflects a nuanced negotiation of power between feminist activists and the state, where differing agendas converged to enable continued activism despite restrictive conditions.

4.4 The Islamic Revolution 1979

4.4.1 Mandatory Veiling Under Ayatollah Khomeini

Following the collapse of the Shah in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, a prominent Shi'i cleric, rose to power, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new regime reinstated Sharia Law as the foundation of governance. In March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced the mandatory veil policy, which was officially codified in 1983. Under Article 102 of the Law of Islamic Punishments, appearing in public without a state-approved hijab was deemed a public offense for Iranian women, standing in stark contrast to Kashf–e hijab in 1936. In the early stages of the revolution, the state-approved hijab referred to the black chador, "a scarf and long dress that covers women's whole body" (Gheytanchi, 2000, p.439). Significantly, in 1995, improper hijab became further criminalised through Article 139 of the Islamic Criminal Code, stating: "women who appear in the public thoroughfare without the Islamic covering will be subject to 10 days to two months imprisonment" (Afshar, 1998, p.197).

As a result, the veil, once a symbol of anti–Western tradition under the Shah, was redefined under the Islamic Republic as a political symbol of the regime. Therefore, as Afary (2009) notes, "the veil gained new shades of meaning" (Afary, 2009, p.293) for Iranian feminists, as the politicisation of the hijab blurred the lines between faith and state ideology. The post–revolutionary period was marked by a deep-seated West phobia, a fear of Western influence perceived as a hidden force undermining national identity (Al-e Ahmed, 1962). Thus, the unveiling policies during the Shah were reframed as symbols of Western cultural dominance, and unveiled women were subsequently denounced by revolutionary forces as "promoting Western values" (Jalili, 2020, p.269). This meant that the Islamic revolution continued the Shah's legacy by providing "an arena in which women's appearance became one of the most powerful manifestations of political identity" (Jalili, 2020, p.264). Despite obvious differences, the mandatory hijab represents a continuation of Iranian "biopolitics" (Moradi, 2023, p.1130) in Pahlavi Iran, in which women's bodies became a controlled part of the

government agenda. Over time, the hijab has transformed from a religious garment into a potent political symbol of state authority. Consequently, acts such as removing or burning the state-imposed hijab have become powerful expressions of feminist resistance against the state, emerging as a central tactic during the WLF movement.

4.4.2 1979 International Women's Day Protests in Tehran

Prior to the Shah's collapse, millions of women actively participated in anti–Shah protests. Interestingly, 'secular' women who previously abandoned the chador under the Shah participated in anti–Shah demonstrations wearing the traditional Iranian chador in support of the Islamic Revolution (Tajuddin, 2000, p.163). Women's widespread participation and support for the early stages of the revolution reflected a widespread belief in "the potential for social change and equality" (Moqadam, 2025, p.7) under Ayatollah Khomeini. However, the systemic rollback of their socio-political rights gained in Pahlavi Iran soon prompted a feminist resistance. For example, Khomeini's announcement of the mandatory hijab led to significant feminist resistance, which culminated in Iran's International Women's Day Protest on March 8th, 1979. This was primarily a secular feminist resistance against the Islamic Republic, focusing on preserving the rights from the Pahlavi era. Importantly, the protestors wore Western clothing, and the traditional chador was absent. Thousands of women gathered to demand that Prime Minister Bazargan address their concerns (Gheytanchi, 2000, p.439). Many of these women, including those who wore hijab, protested the mandatory hijab, focusing specifically on their right to choose, not on abandoning the hijab entirely.

On March 8th, 15,000 protestors took over the Palace of Justice and read a list of eight demands, which included: "the right to choose the attire that best suited women and the country's customs; equal civil rights with men; no discrimination in political, social and economic rights, and a guarantee of full security for women's legal rights and liberties" (New York Times, 1979). Reflecting their liberal demands for equal civil rights in public and private spheres, the slogan of the movement became "in the dawn of freedom, there is an absence of freedom" (New York Times, 1979), a phrase that resonates with the 2022 slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom,' demonstrating the continuity of the Iranian women's movement. Their similarity may indicate that contemporary activists are not only challenging present-day restrictions but are consciously situating themselves within a long history of feminist and

democratic struggle in Iran. In light of harsh repression from the Islamic Republic, “women pursued a subtle, slow, yet persistent resistance and subversion” (Tohidi, 2002, p.860) of their initial militant opposition that took place on March 8. The ongoing feminist resistance from the Islamic Republic’s inception reflects Asef Bayat’s notion of the non-movement (Bayat, 2007). According to Bayat, women’s activism in Islamic states often operates outside conventional forms of organization and mass mobilization. In the aftermath of the revolution, women resisted the rollback of women’s rights “not much by deliberate organised campaigns but largely through mundane daily practices in public domains, such as working, participating in sports, studying, showing interest in art and music, or running for political offices” (Bayat, 2007, p.161). By positioning themselves as public players, Iranian feminist resistance following the early stages of the revolution relies on spatial politics, a traditional Iranian resistance tactic. Spatial politics refers to the ways in which public spaces that have become under state regulation are transformed into areas of resistance and sites of political negotiation of the status quo by protestors (Pourmokhtari, 2017, p.185). The power of this form of feminist resistance lies precisely in its ordinariness, “by assertion of collective will in spite of all odds, by refusing to exit, circumventing the constraints, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, and felt” (Bayat, 2007, p.161).

In sharp contrast to the largely secular, anti–mandatory hijab protests held on March 8th, approximately 100,000 demonstrators, many wearing the black chador, gathered in Tehran on March 16th to express their support for Supreme Leader Khomeini and to denounce the International Women’s Day demonstrations of the previous week (Afary, 2009, p.274). As in Pahlavi Iran, the success of feminist activism in the early stages of the revolution was fundamentally dependent on state support. The Islamist women’s demonstration on March 16th had the full support of the regime, which included “free transportation, and freedom from harassment on the streets” (Afary, 2009, p.274). Therefore, for women’s activism to make progress under the Islamic Republic, compliance with the regime was the only mode for progress. For example, the Women’s Society of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and its Islamic–Reformist orientation was, according to Nakanishi (1994), the “alternative weapon for the survival of the efforts to improve women’s lives in future Iran” (Nakanishi, 1994, p.206).

Interestingly, the long-term intentions of Khomeini’s Islamist policies contradicted the initial intentions. Khomeini’s “outright rejection of feminism gave way to a hybrid dynamic of

outdoing and embracing feminism" (Najmabadi, 2000, p.31), making way for a growing coalition of Islamic feminists and secular feminists in the 1990s (Afary, 2009, p.293). Islamic feminism emerged as a response to the resurgence of political Islam, reflecting a form of feminist activism 'permissible' by Khomeini's regime. Islamic feminism seeks gender equality within an Islamic framework and views the hijab "as a social rather than religious mandate" (Mir-Hosseini, 2007, p.1). Islamic feminism became particularly visible through the writing of the Tehran women's journal, Zanan, founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992. Despite a long history of re–interpretation of Islamic texts concerning women's rights (Wadud, 1995), the Islamic feminism that emerged in the 1990s somewhat broke feminist boundaries and traditions in Iran. The most significant difference was not that women were becoming prominent re–interpreters, but that "the interpretive ventures are carried out in the printed pages of a woman's journal, in a public space, rather than the private chambers of religious scholars" (Najmabadi, 2000, p.31). Finally, its emergence meant Western feminism was "no longer a monolithic entity imbued with immorality and decadence" (Bayat, 2007, p.165) for many Iranian women but was instead a space for feminist collaboration and understanding (Bayat, 2007, p.165).

4.5 Conclusions

Chapter 4 has provided a historical summary of modern Iranian feminism, women's activism, and state restrictions on women's rights from Pahlavi Iran to the early stages of the Islamic Revolution. Contemporary feminist approaches have been shaped by the pattern of control over veiling, both pre- and post-revolution. Despite the fundamental differences between the Shah's modernisation project and Khomeini's sweeping Islamic conservatism, both regimes strategically sought to use women as symbolic representations of their political agendas. Women's advancements and activism in Pahlavi and early revolutionary Iran were largely contingent upon state approval, reflecting a state-centred model of feminism wherein political agency was mediated through official channels rather than autonomous grassroots mobilisation. Despite state-centric advocacy, this did not lead to the absence of feminist activism, but rather to an adaptation aimed at achieving genuine progress. Although women joined large-scale protests, women's rights concerns were often secondary to class concerns and anti-imperialist resistance, frequently subordinated to larger revolutionary agendas (Moqadam, 2025, p.7). Having traced the historical development of Iranian feminism and its negotiation with state power, the discussion now situates these struggles within the broader, interconnected feminist landscape that informs, and is informed by, the WLF movement.

CHAPTER 5
Iranian Feminism in a Globalising Feminist Landscape

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 explores the contemporary global feminist landscape in which the WLF movement emerged. It covers three key trends observable in transnational feminist movements and activism in the past two decades: digital connectivity, decentralised activism, and a renewed focus on bodily autonomy. In doing so, this chapter highlights the international feminist currents available to Iranian feminists by 2022. Processes of globalisation and digitisation have facilitated an increasingly interconnected feminist network, marked by large-scale, transnational mobilisations. This chapter first highlights the role of digital feminism in expanding and sustaining feminist mobilisations. It then examines bodily autonomy and the female body as sites of resistance, highlighting how global resistance acts converge yet adapt to local priorities. Next, this chapter considers how feminists are increasingly transcending their nation-states by engaging with global governance and rights-based discourses. Together, these discussions provide background for Chapter 6, which examines how WLF activists engaged with, whether by adopting or resisting, these trends.

5.2 Digital Feminist Activism

In feminist mobilisations of the past two decades, a consistent feature has been that "the reliance on the internet is a constant" (Ealasaid, 2013). Studies of recent transnational movements, including the #MeToo movement, the 2017 Women's March, and SlutWalk (Darmon, 2014; Einwohner, 2019; Quan-Haase A, 2021) illustrate how ICTs and social media platforms have reconfigured feminist activism, enabling transnational networking, rapid diffusion of ideas, and the amplification of feminist voices on a global scale. Central to this process is hashtag feminism, defined as "a set of feminist online practices that unfolds through hashtags on social media" (Kermani, 2024, p.4751).

Arguably, the #MeToo movement represents the most long-standing and widespread example of hashtag feminism's mobilising effect. In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, "if you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Carty and Reynoso-Barron, 2019, p.383). This singular tweet sparked the beginning of the global #MeToo movement. Within days, the hashtag #MeToo became a collective "rallying cry"

(Guardian, 2017) against sexual harassment. An individual can identify with a social movement by sharing or retweeting a singular hashtag to a global audience (Li M et al., 2021, p.856). Consequently, #MeToo reached 1.2 million tweets in the following four days (Carty and Reynoso-Barron, 2019, p.383), becoming a viral hashtag in over 85 nations (BBC, 2022). Because of this rapid dissemination, feminist campaigns initiated on social media routinely transcend national borders, bringing previously marginalised issues into global discussion. This means that individual acts of resistance, such as re-tweeting a hashtag, connect local activists to broader transnational feminist discourse, facilitating the formation of a collective identity. Collective identity is defined as "the knowledge of one's membership in a social group(s) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Turner-Zwinkels and Zomeren, 2021, p.500), meaning that an individual social media post can signal one's participation in a shared feminist struggle, regardless of geographic location. This facilitates the quick transition from a grassroots movement to a global solidarity network.

Hashtag feminism has had profound effects for feminists operating in authoritarian societies, where government censorship and public restrictions leave limited avenues for feminist organising (Moghadam, 2019, p.141). Illustrating its effects, the hashtag #MeToo and #Tajavoz, the Farsi translation of #Rape, was adopted in the Iranian Twittersphere in August 2020 for Iranian women to discuss their experiences of sexual harassment and assault (Kermani, 2024, p.4751). Previous scholarship has often underestimated the potential for digital feminist activism in authoritarian contexts like Iran, assuming state censorship impedes its potential. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has attempted to control digital activism by "slowing down the Internet's speed, filtering websites and weblogs, and expanding security services on social media" (Golkar, 2025, p.61). Instead, Iranian feminists, like other feminists operating in politically constrained environments, "employ proxies and VPNs to access such platforms and to raise their voices" (Kermani, 2024, p.4755), and have consistently created grassroots hashtag campaigns, including #MyStealthyFreedom by Masih Alinejad and #GirlsofEnghelabStreet. Most recently, the hashtag #MahsaAmini was tweeted and retweeted over 250 million times in Persian, and over 50 million times in English in the first month following her death in police custody (BBC, 2022), demonstrating not only the unprecedented scale of digital mobilisation but also how localised struggles, such as resistance to the mandatory hijab, can rapidly enter global consciousness. Furthermore, the state-imposed censorship on social media in Iran is significant in increasing online activism's importance to Iranians, because state restrictions work to politicise the online sphere,

rendering acts of social media activism forms of resistance to state control. Unlike the free flow of information in democratic contexts, the digital sphere may prove even more powerful in authoritarian settings, where it's very use resists a common 'enemy' and fosters the emergence of a strong feminist counter-public (Kelly-Thompson et al., 2024, p.1185).

While #MeToo is frequently cited as a prominent example of hashtag feminism, it is important to recognise that such digital feminist practices do not originate exclusively in Western contexts. For instance, the Iranian adaption of #MeToo is better understood as an expression of transnational feminism because it demonstrates an intercultural exchange, and locally based contributions to a broader global campaign (Ferree and Tripp, 2006, p.3). With social media's rapid dissemination of global feminist ideas, hashtag campaigns are emerging from diverse geographical locations. For example, the Korean 4B movement gained global attention on TikTok for its promotion of female independence "by abstaining from romantic and sexual relationships with men" (Jeong, 2025). A participant explained to the Guardian that "many Asian social movements have historically been influenced by the west, as we saw with the #MeToo movement" (Guardian, 2024) and instead "we're seeing movements that originated in Korea potentially influencing western societies" (Guardian, 2024), signalling the cross-cultural exchange of feminist tactics and ideas. This unidirectional exchange of feminist tactics is particularly evident in the ways women's bodies have become central sites of resistance. The following section, 5.3, therefore examines bodily autonomy as a unifying feminist cause, exploring how performative and symbolic interventions on the body operate both locally and globally.

5.3 Bodily Autonomy as a Unifying Feminist Cause

The female body has historically functioned as a "symbolic and precarious site of control and resistance" (Baer, 2016, p.19). Over the past two decades, transnational feminist protests have increasingly employed performative resistance strategies, emphasising acts of "masking and unmasking, veiling and unveiling, modesty and uncovering" (Baer, 2016, p.23) of the female body to negotiate forms of state control. Understanding the centrality of bodily autonomy in recent transnational feminist movements is crucial for analysing how movements like WLF achieved global resonance, by reflecting a broader political climate in which women's bodies are increasingly contested sites of power. To contextualise this broader trend, it is useful to examine how feminist mobilisations in different political and cultural contexts employ varied tactics for the same outcome of autonomy.

For example, movements emerging from Western and democratic societies have recently utilised nudity as a form of protest, to signify control over the sexuality of their bodies. Ukrainian-based feminist group Femen has gained international attention through their global topless protests. Founded in 2008, Femen staged its first topless protest in Kyiv, using the slogan "sexstremism" (Baer, 2016, p.23), a concept marked by the uncovering of "the bare breast as a symbol of defiance" (Baer, 2016, p.23). Their display of the naked body is "rebellious in the sense that they cannot be controlled as bodies belonging symbolically to the community or as commodities" (Dornhof, 2014, p.271). Notably, Femen's feminist protest is positioned against multiple patriarchies: "the coercive pressure of all religions, but also against patriarchal and capitalist structures which subjugate the female body as a fetish, an item of property or a commodity" (Dornhof, 2014, p.271). This is significant because their resistance target's multiple locations of patriarchy, making it resonant to feminists across diverse contexts. One illustrative example of the movement's transnational resonance can be seen in Morocco, where activists adapted Femen's visual strategies to challenge local gender norms. In 2013, Moroccan women posted nude images of themselves on their group Facebook page, named "Why don't we see you?" (Salime, 2014, p.15), a deliberate appropriation of a phrase commonly used by men to catcall women in public spaces in Morocco (Salime, 2014, p.15). Similar strategies have appeared elsewhere; for example, Iran's 2014 My Stealthy Freedom Facebook campaign encourages women to share images of themselves removing the hijab in direct resistance to Iran's compulsory hijab law (My Stealthy Freedom, 2019). In Egypt, student Aliaa Elmahdy posted nude photographs on her personal blog, 'A Rebel's Diary,' in 2011 (Dornhof, 2014, p.170), a tactic echoed by Tunisian activist Amina Tyler on Facebook in 2013 (Dornhof, 2014, p.170). Mostly, what is striking about all these examples is the diverse locations from which they emerge, despite their obvious similarities. Strategies of unveiling, nudity, or sharing online images are employed by women across different cultural contexts to contest the shared grievance of male encroachments on their bodily autonomy. In the contemporary, globalised world, the female body has therefore emerged as a site through which multiple patriarchal structures (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, p.17) can be simultaneously challenged, highlighting both the transnational dimensions of feminist resistance and the local specificities of these interventions.

A large-scale example of this form of resistance is the global SlutWalk movement. Unlike Femen, which mainly focuses on 'uncovering' as a form of protest, SlutWalk emphasises the

power of choice, inviting participants to engage regardless of whether individuals choose to dress modestly or reveal more skin. This divergence is important because it underscores that the politics of bodily autonomy can be expressed not only through exposure but also through assertion of choice. This consideration is particularly important when analysing the Iranian WLF movement, as many participants, including Fatemeh Sepehri, one of the activists examined in this study, wear the traditional chador whilst simultaneously protesting for the freedom of choice. While SlutWalk was initiated in 2011 by young feminists in Toronto, Canada, who were "furious with victim-blaming, slut-shaming patriarchal cultures" (Carr, 2013, p.24), the movement's emphasis on women controlling how their bodies are presented resonates with feminist efforts worldwide, where activists challenge diverse forms of patriarchal control through strategies that negotiate both visibility and autonomy. Building on this discussion of resistance tactics, the following section examines how the target of these movements has necessarily shifted, from the nation state to global governance organisations and horizontal networks.

5.4 Decentring the State in Feminist Activism

Contemporary feminist movements have reflected an increasing "disillusionment with the state as a channel for gender justice" (Salime, 2014, p.18). Considerable evidence suggests that new forms of horizontal and global networking have allowed feminist activists to 'leapfrog' past the boundaries of the nation state to "propose visions of women's liberation that national governments might not countenance" (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p.12). As highlighted in Chapter 4, feminist activism during the 1960s was largely state-centric, emerging within the nation state, and addressing themselves to their own governments (Moghadam, 2013, pp.135-136). However, during the 1980s, the "worldwide growth in the population of educated, employed, mobile and politically aware women, feminist discourses and networks" (Moghadam, 2000, p.61) laid the groundwork for new forms of collective action and feminist discourse. Building on these earlier developments, recent feminist mobilisations are increasingly advancing their goals through alternative channels, and subsequently, are increasingly adopting globally resonate rights frames in their activist discourse.

International feminism itself is longstanding, and International Women's Organisations have existed for multiple decades (Moghadam, 2000, p.60), for example, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the International Alliance of Women.

However, international differs from transnational, as transnationalism, according to Moghadam (2000), "suggests a conscious crossing of national boundaries and a superseding of nationalist orientations" (Moghadam, 2000, pp.60-61). Global intergovernmental conferences have played a critical role in establishing the foundations for collaboration among feminist groups across diverse geopolitical contexts. Evidencing this, a study encompassing 126 countries across every global region from 1975–2015 found that UN World Conferences on Women — Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) — increased the frequency of domestic feminist mobilisations (Forester, 2022). This finding importantly underscores the intrinsic relationship between IGOs and local feminist movements. Building on this, such platforms have also facilitated the emergence of what Desai (2005) terms 'solidarities of difference' (Desai, 2005). This refers to collaboration between feminists who pursue shared goals while respecting local particularities. A key example of this manifesting in feminist discourse is the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi. The forum's 'Feminist Movement Building' focused on creating transnational slogans and campaigns that could be globally resonate yet adapted to distinct local realities to attend to the specificities of women's local situations (Hewitt, 2011, p.78). Gigi Francisco, a member of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), affirmed, "we must commit to interlinkages despite our different locations" (Hewitt, 2011, p.76), underscoring the strategic imperative of coordinated transnational feminist action. The use of transnational language by leader Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) is significant because it has contributed to a globally resonate 'rights' language that is increasingly adopted in local feminist mobilisation.

Today, feminist mobilisations remain rooted in local issues, yet their discourses, strategies, and overarching goals increasingly reflect global rights discourse. Tarrow (2005) defines global rights framing as "the use of external symbols to orient local or national claims" (Tarrow, 2005, p.60), a core aspect of transnational feminism. This strategy is particularly significant in contexts where domestic support for feminist agendas is limited or actively suppressed, as it enables activists to situate their struggles within broader international debates and to gain visibility and solidarity beyond national borders. According to Vahabli (2024), transnational feminist movements increasingly align themselves with the global justice movement by adopting world society values. Global rights discourse is dominated by Western neoliberal values, partly due to the English language's hegemonic position within global civil society, and because INGO memberships are dominated by Western states

(Vahabli, 2025, p.323). Discourses of human rights, democratisation, and neoliberal economic individualism are thus propagated through IGOs and IGOs (Kennedy, 2010, p.32). Vahabli (2024) argues that, due to the Global North's dominance within global civil society, feminist movements that adopt world society scripts are more likely to gain international media visibility and attract broader support by presenting a "globally resonate frame" (Vahabli, 2024, p.320). Global rights-based movements for democracy and freedom provide both a legitimising framework and a discourse through which feminist struggles can be articulated transnationally.

An earlier example of this strategic adoption is the Female Inheritance Movement in Hong Kong, 1994, where rural indigenous women joined Hong Kong's women's groups to call for legal change to female inheritance rights to land (Merry and Stern, 2005, p.387). The movement adopted key global ideas of gender equality and human rights, as well as a critique of patriarchy in their activism dialogue. Interestingly, the movement's transnational articulation gained higher media coverage due to its convergence with key global justice dialogue, dominated by the Global North. This trend raises critical questions about the discursive strategies employed by Iranian feminist activists in the 2022 WLF movement, particularly regarding how the movement navigates and negotiates the tension between local realities and global narratives.

5.5 Conclusions

Chapter 5 highlights how the feminist landscape is increasingly defined by digital activism, transnationalism, and a shared emphasis on bodily autonomy, creating new spaces of connection and solidarity across borders. Subsequently, local experiences are being related to larger global narratives of gender inequality, with local stories relying on digital efficacy and transnational articulation to garner international support. These global feminist dynamics were not just present around the WLF movement; they played an active role in shaping its rapid international dissemination and discursive framing. The interplay between global feminist momentum outlined in this chapter and Iran's long history of state control over women's dress, as outlined in Chapter 4, has positioned Iranian feminists at the intersection of local history and global feminist discourse. Building on this foundation, Chapter 6 presents a critical discourse analysis of prominent Iranian feminist activism during the WLF movement, examining the extent to which WLF's activist discourse aligns with these global currents while simultaneously negotiating the specificities of Iran's local context.

CHAPTER 6
Discourse Analysis and Findings

6.1 Introduction

Using Fairclough's (1992) CDA and frame alignment theory (Snow et al., 1986), this chapter presents four dominant discursive frames within the discourse analysed: (1) Global Rights Frames, (2) Feminist Solidarity Frames, (3) Bodily Autonomy Frames, and (4) Revolutionary Frames. Together, these frames capture the central ways in which activists articulated feminist grievances to mobilise support. In total, 96 references across diaspora and local samples were coded into these categories, providing a rich data set for examining how activists discursively negotiate between local specificities and transnational feminist discourses. The following sub-sections examine each frame in detail, tracing how transnational feminist discourses shape the visibility, legitimacy, and political resonance of the WLF, while also revealing tensions between local and diaspora articulations.

Table 3. Codebook of Thematic Frames

Thematic Code	Most Frequent Words/ Phrases	Total References	Diaspora References	Local References
Global Rights Frame	*Gender Apartheid, Democracy, Equality, Human Rights, Women's Rights, UNCSW, CEDAW*	45	28	17
Feminist Solidarity Frame	*Sisterhood, Global Feminist Movement, The World's Feminists*	13	12	1
Bodily Autonomy Frame	*My Body, My Choice, Compulsory Hijab, Removing Hijab, Burning Hijab*	22	10	12

Revolutionary Frame	*Revolutionary Movement, Female Led Revolution*	16	12	4

6.2 Global Rights Frames

Within the total corpus, this frame emerged as the most frequently invoked, appearing 45 times. WLF feminists consistently articulated their struggle through the language of global human rights. Owing to its close affinity with Western liberal ideology, the adoption of this global framing was evident in the activists' frequent use of terms such as 'democracy,' 'freedom,' 'equality,' and 'human rights' to advance specifically Iranian feminist demands, including the rejection of the mandatory hijab. The data further revealed comparable levels of engagement with rights-based frames in both the diaspora and local samples. References to global human rights discourse occurred 28 times in the diaspora sample and 17 times in the local sample, a notably high frequency for the latter, given the risks associated with invoking international rights discourses from within Iran. Taken together, the prominence of this frame suggests that activists consistently sought to legitimise their claims through the language of international rights, thereby situating the WLF within a transnational feminist discourse grounded in universal principles of equality and justice, thereby enhancing the movement's salience to global audiences. The greater reliance on this frame among diaspora activists aligns with expectations, given their stronger proximity to and engagement with global advocacy networks and media audiences. For example, in a speech delivered at the Academy Women's Luncheon in Los Angeles, diaspora feminist activist and actress Nazanin Boniadi explicitly framed the Iranian feminist struggle within the frame of global human rights:

Nazanin Boniadi – Diaspora

"Iranian society is seeing the intersectionality of gender equality and other basic human rights" (Boniadi, 2022)

Boniadi's framing of the bid for women's equality in Iran during WLF as a matter of 'basic human rights' reflects the use of frame amplification (Snow et al., 1986), defined as the "invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events" (Snow, 1986, p.496). Boniadi situates WLF's demand for women's rights within broader, transnationally resonant human rights frameworks, thereby broadening the audience

for which these claims are compelling and relatable. Snow et al. (1986) note that values can be "construed as modes of conduct or states of existence that are thought to be worthy of protection and promotion" (Snow, 1986, p.469). By framing gender equality as inseparable from universally recognised human rights, Boniadi not only legitimises WLF's claims but also positions them as morally and politically salient to a global audience, extending the reach and resonance of the movement's advocacy.

This strategic framing aligns with patterns identified in previous research (Rupp & Taylor, 1999; Khor, 2013; Baer, 2016), which suggests that feminist activists often adopt universal rights frames, by converging feminist and humanist dialogues to expand their movement's reach (Rupp & Taylor, 1999, pp. 363–386). This approach has proved effective in practice, with WLF inspiring solidarity protests in major cities, including London, New York, and Paris (Guardian, 2022), and gaining support from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), notably the UN, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Khor (2013) similarly notes that connecting local movements to broader global initiatives can expand the platforms available for advocacy (Khor, 2013, p.18). This outward orientation is further evident in diaspora activist, Shirin Ebadi's speech to the UN Security Council, delivered less than two months after the protests began:

Shirin Ebadi – Diaspora

> "Iranians are shouting the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." To fulfil such a slogan, a government in Iran must respect the standards of equality and human rights" (Ebadi, 2022).

Ebadi's framing of the WLF in terms of 'equality' and 'human rights' exemplifies frame amplification (Snow et al., 1986), strategically positioning the movement's locally rooted slogan within globally resonant normative frameworks. By linking specific Iranian feminist demands to universal standards, Ebadi not only legitimises WLF's claims but also extends their resonance to transnational audiences. This strategy is particularly significant given that Muslim women are frequently marginalized within global feminist discourse (Scharff, 2011), often depicted as "passive victims of patriarchal oppression" (Scharff, 2011, p.122) rather than recognised as active agents of feminist advocacy. Occupying a diaspora positionality, Ebadi assumes both the capacity and responsibility to challenge these reductive frames, countering the "othering" of Muslim women in global narratives. By situating the Iranian feminist struggle within broader neoliberal and human rights discourses, she strategically

bridges the gap between local conditions and transnational feminist frameworks. Furthermore, Ebadi further highlights the paradox between Iran's local conditions for women, and their position in global human rights frameworks in her speech to the UN Security Council:

Shirin Ebadi

"Despite being a member of the United Nations commission on the status of women, Islamic Republic takes refuge in cultural relativism every time it is accused of violating human rights" (Ebadi, 2022)

Ebadi's repeated references to global rights organisations, delivered to an audience at the UN Security Council, signify a strategic shift in the target of advocacy, from the Islamic Republic itself to broader international frameworks, disrupting a locational understanding of feminist activism within the confines of the nation-state (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, p.13). This is particularly significant given Iran's relative exclusion from international gender rights frameworks. Feminist movements emerging from democratic states often benefit from their states' commitment to global charters, which enables activists to easily articulate feminist struggles within the global arena. However, Iran's refusal to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the primary international treaty for women's rights, for example, means that diaspora feminists such as Ebadi function as crucial feminist intermediaries, relating to the local atmosphere whilst compensating for the structural hurdles faced by feminist movements emerging out of authoritarian fundamentalist regimes. Considering this, an interesting pattern within the human rights frame was the consistent appeal to the global community for legal reform to the definition of apartheid. This demand appeared four times in the diaspora corpus: twice by Masih Alinejad, and twice by Nazanin Boniadi. In her interview with MSNBC, Alinejad specifically directs an appeal to the international human rights community:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"We the women of Iran and Afghanistan we launched a campaign to actually call on democratic countries, on the governments, to expand the apartheid in the legal definition to gender apartheid as well" (Alinejad, 2023)

Alinejad's appeal to democratic governments reflects a transcendence of the Islamic Republic as a mechanism of representation (Moghadam, 2005) for WLF's feminist demands. Rather than seeking legislative change from the Islamic Republic, the corpus reveals a preference to appeal to international law, reflecting disillusionment with the state's capacity for reform. Of particular interest is the contrast between these discourses and the feminist rhetoric deployed during Iran's previous major social movement, the 2009 Green Movement. Following the 2009 elections, legalistic, reform-based feminist activism surged, with Iranian women forming a broad coalition comprising civil rights advocates, NGOs, and political activists. This coalition prioritized two primary demands: firstly, "to make Iran a state party to the CEDAW" and secondly, "to eliminate all discriminatory laws against women" (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p.84). These legal demands were directed at the four candidates in the 2009 presidential election and reflected a legalistic feminist strategy centered on lobbying and civil advocacy. The contrast between 2009 and 2022 is striking: contemporary feminists increasingly prioritise global engagement over state-centered reforms. This shift underscores the cumulative effect of unmet feminist demands since the Islamic Republic's inception in 1979, suggesting that Iranian feminists are progressively seeking legitimacy and support through transnational channels. Diaspora activist Nazanin Boniadi similarly frames the Islamic Republic as an apartheid state in her speech at the Academy Women's Luncheon held in Los Angeles:

Nazanin Boniadi – Diaspora

"The bitter reality is that the Islamic Republic is an apartheid state for women" (Boniadi, 2022)

That references to the expansion of the legal definition of apartheid were made exclusively by diaspora activists is unsurprising, given that diaspora members have greater access to global platforms. Operating from the US, Alinejad and Boniadi are not subject to the same censorship or restrictions faced by activists within Iran, living under state surveillance, which limits their ability to participate in international forums or leverage transnational legal networks in the way diaspora activists may. This positional difference shapes both their framing strategies and their critical role in mobilising and amplifying WLF's demands internationally. In doing so, it challenges state – centric models of feminism and invites scholars to reconsider where power is located in a globalised world and how feminist resistance can most effectively be mobilised. Notably, while the local sample did not overtly

advocate for legal reform, it nevertheless demonstrated comparable strategies of frame amplification, mobilising global rights values in its discourse. For example, jailed Iranian feminist activist and 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Narges Mohammadi discusses the violated rights of women during WLF in conjunction with globally resonate goals of *"democracy" and "peace":*

Narges Mohammadi – Local

"I would like to thank the global media, the journalists who are our resounding and vibrant voices in the world, the world's feminists who consider women's rights as a gauge and a measure for democracy, ethics, peace, and human life, and have constantly pushed the world forward" (Mohammadi, 2023)

This extract, taken from a letter smuggled out of Tehran's Evin Prison, expresses gratitude to the global community for awarding Mohammadi the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her work on women's rights. Here, she demonstrates an acute awareness that Iran's feminist struggle is embedded within a transnational network of solidarity. Crucially, she positions Iranian women's liberation as a fundamental precondition for democracy, framing it as both an ethical imperative and an essential dimension of human life. According to frame alignment theory (Snow et al., 1986), political values vary in their global resonance and are often "arrayed in a hierarchy such that some have greater salience than others" (Snow, 1986, p.469) due to their normative appeal. Mohammadi strategically invokes such normative values of ethics, democracy, and human life, which are understood as ideals regarding how societies ought to be organised and how people ought to live. By situating these values as contingent upon the success of the WLF movement's feminist goals, she amplifies the struggle's moral legitimacy and extends its relevance beyond the Iranian context to a universal terrain of human rights and political justice.

Importantly, while values such as democracy clearly reflect the adoption of global discourse, the Iranian feminist pursuit of democracy during 2022 must not be misconstrued as an "off-shoot of Western liberal democratic projects" (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p.79). Rather, the struggle for democracy is also deeply rooted in Iranian culture and its social landscape, with historical continuity from political protest during the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), through the 2009 Green Movement, and into the present. Therefore, the activist's frequent

invocation of global rights discourse must be understood first as a reflection of Iran's long-standing sociopolitical context, and second as a strategic adaptation of global frameworks when operating under a restrictive theocracy.

Building on this, although the local sample adopted global rights frames at a similar frequency to the diaspora sample, they did so they did so from a position of difference. Their articulation often linked uniquely Iranian conditions, such as the mandatory hijab and state violence, to broader goals of democracy and freedom. In a powerful juxtaposition, Mohammadi's letter from within Evin Prison underscores her unique position as a feminist operating under direct state repression, situating her advocacy for Iranian women's freedom within the lived reality of incarceration:

Narges Mohammadi – Local

> "This letter is not written by a free feminist in a developed democratic society, benefiting from civil protest methods and human rights, but rather by an imprisoned woman who, like millions of Iranian women, has been living under the authority and oppression of a military system with ideological, patriarchal, and tyrannical foundations since the age of 6, deprived of life, youth, femininity, and motherhood" (Mohammadi, 2023)

Earlier in her letter, Mohammadi noted that her message was "in accordance with human rights, ethics, and of course, feminism, to protest against the continuation of violence and sexual harassment of women" (Mohammadi, 2023). While embracing human rights and feminist discourse, she emphasises that the pathways to achieving these shared ideals necessarily diverge within Iran's specific sociopolitical context. Narges Mohammadi was arrested in November 2021 for attending the memorial ceremony for Ebrahim Ketabdar, a protester killed by security forces during the 2019 Bloody November protests (Amnesty International, 2023). She was subsequently convicted again in 2022 for "spreading propaganda against the system" (Amnesty International, 2023) in connection with her feminist activism during WLF. Her history of political persecution exemplifies not only a personal struggle but also the systemic repression faced by women and feminist voices in Iran. Repeated convictions highlight how state authorities criminalise human rights and

feminist advocacy, underscoring the strategic importance of appealing to global human rights networks and cultivating international support to advance feminist demands.

Evidence from WLF further reinforces this urgency. Amnesty International reported the use of live ammunition and sexual violence against women protesters in 2022, alongside deliberate and ongoing internet and mobile disruptions (Amnesty International, 2022). Within this context, foregrounding their local positioning emerged as a consistent discursive strategy in the local sample. Imprisoned activist Fatemeh Sepehri, for example, highlights the deep-rooted struggle of Iranian women for equality, emphasising the compounded frustration arising from decades of systemic discrimination:

Fatemeh Sepehri – Local

"Many of the rights and privileges that belong to equal human beings, the Islamic Republic considered us women second and third class, and the anger of women in these 44 years is greater than that of other people" (Sepehri, 2022)

This discourse exemplifies Fairclough's (1992) concept of intertextuality, in which the historicity of discourse allows past experiences to be reinterpreted in the present, shaping social and cultural change (Fairclough, 1992, p.102). Discourse, in this view, is constantly responding to and reworking prior texts and experiences (Fairclough, 1992, p.102), enabling activists to draw on historical struggles to legitimise contemporary claims. At 61, Sepehri has witnessed a historical struggle for women since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Sepehri situates the contemporary struggle against Iran's mandatory hijab within a much longer trajectory of feminist resistance. This selective engagement with history allows her to construct a frame in which the Iranian women's movement is not a fleeting phenomenon but a long-standing, deeply rooted social struggle, even if global attention has only recently focused on it.

Overall, by linking local struggles and the history of the Iranian women's movement with global human rights frameworks, WLF activists position the movement as both deeply rooted in Iran's feminist history and part of a broader transnational network of solidarity. The human rights frame emerged during the first round of open coding. Coding for global rights discourse then revealed frequent references to a 'global sisterhood,' the 'world's feminists,' and the broader 'global feminist movement.' Through subsequent rounds of coding, this was further refined into the sub-code: feminist solidarity frames.

6.3 Feminist Solidarity Frames

A key aim of this study was to reconceptualise post-modernist accounts of feminist activism, ones that often set up divides among feminists according to their geographic location or cultural background (Mojab, 2001, p.64). The frequent use of feminist solidarity terms throughout the sample indicates the erosion of these rigid cultural boundaries and alludes to the fact that, despite its local ties, WLF has ignited cross-border solidarity among feminists. The feminist solidarity frame was utilised 13 times, with 92% of the references made by diaspora activists. Within the diaspora sample, US-based feminist activist Masih Alinejad emerged as the most prominent advocate of global feminist solidarity, explicitly referencing it 10 times. On the first International Women's Day following the outbreak of WLF protests, Alinejad underscored the necessity of transnational solidarity in an interview with MSNBC:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

> "When it comes to Iran and Afghanistan, we cannot survive, we cannot live, that is why we need global feminist movement to be with us and echo our voice" (Alinejad, 2023)

Through this appeal, Alinejad foregrounds the acute dangers faced by women in restrictive local contexts while positioning the global feminist movement as an essential amplifier of their voices. Notably, her use of the collective pronoun 'we', despite being exiled from Iran since 2009, signals a sustained connectedness between Iranian feminists across borders, and a sense of responsibility as a diaspora feminist (Tohidi, 2023, p.53). This would imply Iran's large diaspora of approximately 6 to 8 million (Clingendael, 2023), is intrinsically connected to the local fight for women's rights. Operating largely from the West, diaspora feminists maintain close ties with activists inside the country, helping to amplify local struggles and facilitate the global visibility of movements like WLF. Alinejad's approach confirms Tohidi and Daneshpour's (2025) observation of a "transnational feminist consciousness that transcends Iran's borders and censorship" (Tohidi and Daneshpour, 2025, pp.271 - 272). In the same interview, in response to the question: "Do you feel from your point of view that there is an international coalition of women who feel that they're fighting the same fight?" (MSNBC, 2023), Alinejad states:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"It should be a coalition of women fighting for the rights … when it comes to women's rights, we have to stick together we have to be together and put away our political agenda" (Alinejad, 2023).

In both statements, global feminist networks appear to be the primary target of Alinejad's activism, taking precedence over state – focused activism. This discursive move is a significant indication of Iranian feminists' disillusionment with the prospect of hijab bill reform under the Islamic Republic (Khalili, 2023, p.134), as evidenced by the nearly 42-year resilience of the Islamic Republic's mandatory hijab, codified in 1983. Notably, across the entire corpus there are no references directing calls for gender reform to the Islamic Republic, only the international rights community. Alinejad's focus on the global coalition of feminists therefore reflects more than her diasporic position, it underscores the diminishing confidence among Iranian feminists in the regime's willingness or capacity to address hijab policy, highlighting how WLF activists leverage global networks to advance women's rights when domestic avenues for legal reform are effectively blocked. Although this extract represents only a small sample of Alinejad's feminist activism, it reflects a strategy she has consistently employed over the years. In May 2014, Alinejad launched the transnational *My Stealthy Freedom* Facebook campaign against compulsory hijab, a digital space where Iranian women globally could post photos without the compulsory hijab on. In addition, the tendency to transcend borders is not a new phenomenon within diaspora activism. Diaspora feminists are great examples of fractured political identities, living 'between' nations (Mehta,2004). The diasporic position in this instance creates the possibility of not only imagining feminist identity beyond cultural or political restraints, but the ability to act as a cultural negotiator to call upon the global feminist community, bridging local struggles with transnational networks of solidarity. To highlight a final example from Alinejad, at the Global Women's Summit for WLF, Alinejad adopts a common discursive tactic within contemporary transnational movements to construct a collective identity:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"You killed Mahsa, now we are all Mahsa" (Alinejad, 2022)

Mahsa Amini's name, which became a call to action (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022) in Iran following her death in police custody, is discursively rearticulated here as a transnational

symbol of feminist resistance. Given that her audience was the Global Women's Summit, the significance of Alinejad's framing lies in its deliberate outward orientation. Here, she employs a strategy of frame extension, which involves the amplification of specific elements to "clarify the linkage between personal or group interests and support" (Snow, 1986) for the feminist movement. In effect, Alinejad attempts to form a collective identity around Mahsa Amini, expanding the solidarity pool beyond Iranian women to encompass a wider transnational feminist community with which global audiences can identify and connect. Diaspora activist Boniadi also relays a similar strategy by, again, centering Amini's death within the rights of women globally:

Nazanin Boniadi - Diaspora

> "Mahsa Amini's murder has forced us to reckon with our complacency in protecting the rights of women globally" (Boniadi, 2022)

These statements situate Amini's death as a global feminist responsibility. This rhetoric echoes collective identity strategies observed in transnational movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. By definition, collective identity refers to "the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from the knowledge of one's membership in a social group(s) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Turner-Zwinkels, 2021, p.500). Just as George Floyd became a symbol for many Black Americans confronting systemic racism and #MeToo offered a collective framework for survivors of sexual assault, Mahsa Amini is operationalised as a symbolic figure for women subjected to violence by Iran's morality police. Mahsa Amini was not a dissident, nor an anti-veiling activist; her significance lies in her commonness, she could have been anyone, which allows her to symbolise and unite a broad spectrum of women. As Gunnarsson (2011) notes, "no matter how different women's lives were … there was something quite disadvantageous about all women's lives, and that this something had to do with their being women" (Gunnarsson, 2011, p.32). Mahsa Amini's death, in these framings, has everything to do with being a woman in the Islamic Republic. Finally, in a speech delivered to the Academy Women's Luncheon in Los Angeles, Boniadi further underscores the interconnectedness of feminist struggles across borders:

Nazanin Boniadi – Diaspora

> "Our battles cannot be won without attention to theirs" (Boniadi, 2022)

Boniadi highlights that issues familiar to her Los Angeles audience, such as abortion rights and sexual harassment within the film industry, cannot be fully confronted without also acknowledging Iranian women's struggles for bodily autonomy and freedom. This framing is central to Khandelwal's (2009) discussion of cross-border feminism, which assumes that "cultural boundaries are permeable" (Khandelwal, 2009, p.604) among feminists, and thus they tend to extend national issues across borders. Furthermore, Boniadi's framing resonates with what Friedman (1995) terms the "two-fold process" of globalised activism: the universalisation of particularism, whereby Iranian women's struggle for rights is presented as a universal feminist concern, and the particularisation of universalism, whereby global values of women's rights and freedom are grounded in the specificities of Iran's sociopolitical context (Friedman, 1995, p.72). In other words, a particular struggle gets projected as relevant to all women, everywhere.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the local activist sample utilised the feminist solidarity frame in only one instance, where Mohammadi thanked "the world's feminists who consider women's rights as a gauge and a measure for democracy" (Mohammadi, 2023); no other explicit positive references to global feminists were present. A possible explanation is that the sampled local activists operate from Evin Prison in Tehran, under intense state surveillance and repression. In such conditions, explicitly referencing international connections could compromise their safety and limit their ability to publicly engage with transnational networks, though this explanation remains tentative.

Furthermore, a core mechanism through which solidarity and shared feminist values were discursively constructed was the framing of bodily autonomy. During coding, references to global sisterhood frequently intersected with demands for bodily autonomy but were distinguished as a separate frame due to their strategic prominence in activists' discourse.

6.4 Bodily Autonomy Frames

While compulsory hijab laws are deeply embedded in Iran's local reality, through globalisation, Iranian women have become increasingly aware of broader struggles for bodily autonomy occurring across the globe. The anti-hijab resistance, therefore, constitutes not only a protest against local religious restrictions but also forms part of a wider global feminist struggle for the right to control one's body. Notably, the act of removing the hijab during

WLF's 2022 protests resonated strongly with global feminists. In response to circulating images of the protests, celebrities such as Marion Cotillard, Isabelle Huppert, and Jane Birkin posted images of themselves cutting their hair in solidarity with WLF (Varma, 2024, p.123). Consequently, Iranian feminist protest tactics became globally legible symbols of feminist resistance.

Within the corpus, references to bodily autonomy appeared a total of 22 times, 10 times by the diaspora sample and 12 times by the local sample. Perhaps the most circulated symbol of the movement, the removal of the mandatory hijab, repeatedly emerged throughout this frame. Diaspora activist Masih Alinejad, for example, reframes a transnational slogan to amplify the struggle for choice in Iran:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"there was a women's march in New York, everywhere, Washington DC, I was part of the women's march, because the slogan was my body, my choice, many Western female politicians when it comes to Islamic Republic and Afghanistan, they never say my body, my choice, they say to Islamic Republic and Taliban, my body is your choice, stop doing that" (Alinejad, 2022)

In this extract, Alinejad employs frame bridging to link geographically distinct yet ideologically resonant struggles for bodily autonomy. Frame bridging refers to "the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem" (Snow et al., 1986, p.465). By appropriating the transnational pro-choice slogan 'my body, my choice' and reframing it as 'my body is your choice,' Alinejad strategically exposes the complicity of global feminists who overlook Muslim women's struggles, while situating WLF within a broader, globally legible feminist discourse. Her intervention occurs in a context of heightened global attention to reproductive rights: less than a year after the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade (Lowery, 2022), international focus on women's bodily autonomy intensified, creating a transnational moment that Alinejad leverages to amplify WLF's cause. By mediating between Western and Iranian feminist contexts, she positions WLF and the Western reproductive rights movement as "two interconnected aspects of the same phenomenon" (Mason, 2017, p.66), demonstrating how local struggles are inextricably shaped by transnational feminist flows (Mendoza, 2002, p.296). Through frame bridging, Alinejad not only expands WLF's potential support base but also challenges the binary between Western and Iranian feminists, highlighting the global

relevance of the fight for bodily autonomy. She further challenges the perceived binary between Western and Iranian feminists in her interview with MSNBC:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"some sisters in the Western countries, they're worried, that they're not going to touch compulsory hijab issue because they don't want to cause Islamophobia, it is all about my body my choice" (Alinejad, 2023).

In this extract, Alinejad links geographically and culturally distinct feminist movements around the shared principle of bodily autonomy, demonstrating how ideologically similar struggles can be connected even when previously unaligned. By emphasising common experiences and universal principles, she cultivates transnational feminist solidarities and highlights women's global similarities rather than their differences. Her intervention also critiques Western hesitancy to engage with Iranian women's struggles due to concerns over cultural relativism, a critique that appeared five times in the diaspora sample and seven times in the local sample. Similarly, diaspora activist Nazanin Boniadi challenges binaries between Western and Iranian feminists to contest cultural relativist attitudes towards the mandatory hijab:

Nazanin Boniadi – Diaspora

"To negate these as 'cultural differences' dismisses the countless Iranian women who are risking everything for their basic rights. Cultural norms don't need to be enforced by threat of death" (Boniadi, 2022)

Together, these interventions render Iranian women's struggles globally legible, linking local activism to broader transnational feminist concerns while contesting narratives that obscure systemic oppression under the guise of cultural difference. The local sample reflected a similar critique, indicating a convergence of opinion across diaspora and local activists on the mandatory hijab and underscoring a shared commitment to bodily autonomy. In a letter from prison on WLF, Narges Mohammadi positions the compulsory hijab as institutionalised control:

Narges Mohammadi – Local

"the Islamic Republic imposes *compulsory hijab* on the society not out of concern for religious obligations, nor for the sake of social customs and traditions, nor as it claims, to preserve the dignity and prestige of women; rather, it openly forces the *compulsory hijab* on them for the purpose of suppressing and controlling women and for extending that control to the entire society" (Mohammadi, 2023)

Feminist scholars have similarly warned that appeals to cultural relativism have "increasingly become a euphemism for restricting or denying women's rights" (Moller-Okin, 1998, p.36). Here, Alinejad, Boniadi and Mohammadi warn that dismissing Iran's mandatory hijab as a cultural difference erases the lived reality of Iranian women. This discourse deconstructs the binary created between sexual liberties in Western democracies, and controlled sexual morality in Muslim countries (Dornhof, 2014, p.271), demonstrating that in both cases, control of the female body remains a central mechanism of power.

Interestingly, although the local sample discussed bodily autonomy an almost equal number of times, their articulation and framing showed significant differences. The local feminist sample consistently frames bodily autonomy through explicit references to the mandatory hijab, frequently invoking its historical and sociopolitical context. Unveiling and cutting one's hair is deeply rooted in Iranian protest and mourning culture. The act derives from Iranian mythology and symbolises "grief, moral outrage, and being prepared to fight against tyranny" (Orazani, 2024, p.140), allowing activists to frame bodily autonomy and resistance in ways that are both locally meaningful and legible to global audiences. Drawing on her local experience, veiled Iranian prisoner Fatemeh Sepehri highlights her first – hand experience of the 2022 protests:

Fatemeh Sepehri – Local

"Tonight, I saw many of these women who were there, their headscarves if they had them, were around their necks, and I think that no one will wear a headscarf anymore, forced by the Islamic Republic. Now, whoever wants to, that's their choice but the Islamic Republic cannot enforce it. I don't think that from now on, if it is an Islamic Republic, it can't do anything to cover women" (Sepehri, 2022)

Once embodying the Islamic Republic's ideal woman, as a "veiled woman, the widow of a war martyr, and the member of a war martyr's family" (NIAC, 2025), Sepehri's positive re-call of women removing hijab during protest positions the hijab as a choice down to women, not the Islamic Republic. Her sample was particularly important to the study to illuminate perspectives from traditional Iranian women, as opposition to the compulsory hijab in 2022 was not simply reserved for secular Iranian feminists. Muslim women are "all too rapidly seen in the conflict between Islamist and secular discourses" (Dornhof, 2014, p.275). Therefore, Sepehri's perspective is important, bridging the man-made gap between tradition and liberty, to advocate for the shared goal of autonomy. Iranian women have historically had to navigate the "divide between the modern and the traditional" (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p.79), and it was important to highlight the porousness of the binaries of tradition and modernity in Iran. Mostly, her positive reception of unveiling, despite her position as a veiled, practicing Muslim, truly illuminates the modern Iranian woman and the ongoing fight for the right to choose, rather than a total rejection of hijab. Overall, Sepehri's framing, like so many veiled women in Iran, works to overcome "the old hostile divide between secular and religious thought" (Moghadam, 2002, p.1144). As noted earlier, Sepehri was arrested following this interview for 'propaganda activities against the Islamic republic' and 'cooperation with hostile governments' (Iran Wire, 2025), representing significant sacrifice for the ultimate outcome of choice for others. One of the most notable articulations of bodily autonomy, as well as a critique of cultural relativism, comes from imprisoned activist Bahareh Hedayat, who reflects on the implications of Western celebrations of the hijab:

Bahareh Hedayat – Local

"Though this movement is aligned with the global paradigm vis – à – vis the issue of women, it simultaneously has risen against a current in this paradigm which has tried to normalize (forced) hijab" (Hedayat, 2023)

Hedayat recognises that WLF is certainly aligned with the global women's rights bid for bodily autonomy, but that this momentum often attempts to justify Iran's mandatory hijab:

Bahareh Hedayat – Local

" (an international current) has tried to normalise hijab or present it as a culture, and has gone so far as to convince international foundations to record an 'International Day of Hijab' in calendars of international events and to celebrate the body of women becoming invisible,

without thinking for a moment about what exactly the repercussions of this invisibility will be on women's everyday lives" (Hedayat, 2023)

Despite feminist inclusion of Muslim women being profoundly beneficial for representation, transnational interactions can add complexities for local activists residing in Iran "as they navigate the influence of these international perspectives" (Tohidi, 2025, p.272). Hedayat's striking criticism, written from within Tehran's Evin Prison, exposes a profound blind spot in some Western feminist deployments of intersectionality. International Hijab Day was founded by Bangladeshi–New Yorker Nazma Khan because of her personal experience of Islamophobia in New York in the aftermath of 9/11 (Khan, 2025). However, an International Day of Hijab risks presenting it as a consistent religious symbol. It implies a single, universal meaning of the hijab and, by extension, a single Muslim woman's experience. This can legitimise the very system that Iranian women are resisting, by normalising a form of gendered oppression that is central to the resilience of the Islamic Republic's theocracy. Furthermore, Hedayat's framing strategically employs frame amplification by clarifying the Iranian attitude towards hijab for Western feminists who may have overlooked it. By highlighting the risks of portraying the hijab as a universal cultural symbol, she intensifies the interpretive significance of local experiences, ensuring that the Iranian struggle for bodily autonomy is understood in relation to the global fight for bodily autonomy, and not as a localised, untouchable topic. This amplification makes the movement's grievances and objectives more visible and harder to misinterpret or overlook.

Finally, the coding of the corpus revealed a notable intersection between bodily autonomy frames and the final core frame, revolutionary frames. Before proceeding to section 6.4, it is useful to consider two key examples that were coded into both the bodily autonomy frames sample and the revolutionary frames sample:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"For me, fighting against hijab for 8 years, echoing the voice of Iranian women fighting against morality police, echoing the voice of women in Afghanistan saying that you know this is 21st century we have to be free to choose what we want to wear, to choose what lifestyle we want to have. We do not have democracy to change the law so that is why we have to change the regime" (Alinejad, 2023)

Nazanin Boniadi – Diaspora

"Hundreds of thousands of Iranian women are flouting the compulsory hijab in major Iranian cities as we speak demanding an end to the Islamic Republic" (Boniadi, 2023)

Together, these examples reveal a broader finding in the corpus, showing that activists strategically position the removal of the hijab not merely as an assertion of bodily autonomy, but as a symbolic act of revolutionary defiance against the Islamic Republic, a theme that will be explored further in the following section.

6.5 Revolutionary Frames

The corpus revealed that revolutionary frames were utilised 16 times within the sample. Revolutionary frames were constructed by the activists through labelling WLF as a democratic or feminist revolution, often in comparison to previous Iranian movements. This framing positions feminist progress as a necessary precondition for democratic revolution in Iran. Among the four main coded themes, this one most clearly demonstrates the locally adapted dimensions of Iranian feminist activism. A key question this thesis asks is: What does the activist discourse of Iranian feminists tell us about the evolution of feminist activism under authoritarian constraint and globalisation? This section reveals revolution as a prerequisite for feminist progress in authoritarian and fundamentalist states, underscoring that transnational feminism can operate, emerge, and evolve under Iran's regime by adapting. In doing so, it illuminates what it means to be an Iranian feminist and contributes a unique perspective to the study of feminist praxis from restricted local conditions. In contrast to feminist protest discourse in Western or democratic states, revolution is not a backdrop to the feminist demands of WLF; it is the feminist demand. Firstly, Masih Alinejad underscores a key distinction in the mobilisation of feminist movements within authoritarian contexts:

Masih Alinejad – Diaspora

"We don't have democracy to change the law so that is why we have to change the regime" (Alinejad, 2023)

In her interview with MSNBC, Alinejad goes on to describe Iranian women as "lonely soldiers" (Alinejad, 2023) in their local struggle against the compulsory hijab prior to WLF's emergence. Unlike Western feminists, who often engage with democratic structures for

progress WLF activists insist on dismantling the current regime to secure women's rights, positioning feminist progress and revolution as intrinsically linked. This finding resonates with Asef Bayat's (2007) concept of the non-movement, illustrating the diverse ways in which Muslim women under authoritarian regimes may, consciously or unconsciously, resist, negotiate, or circumvent gender discrimination (Bayat, 2007, p.161), in contrast to the approaches of Western feminists.

Given the unique repression Iranian feminists face from both the state and society, revolution emerges as a prerequisite for feminist progress. However, the scale and intensity of activism within the WLF movement complicate aspects of Bayat's conception of feminist activism under Islamic and authoritarian regimes, which he defines as "not necessarily resorting to extraordinary and overarching movements" (Bayat, 2007, p.161). WLF, by contrast, led to 82 consecutive days of nationwide protest, spanning all 31 provinces (HRANA, 2022) and garnering international solidarity through highly organised and strategically framed mobilisation. Despite WLF's visibility and reach, the underlying dynamic persists feminist activists under authoritarian and fundamentalist constraint must articulate fundamentally different demands to achieve progress comparable to that in less repressive contexts. Highlighting the unique challenges faced by Iranian feminists, Shirin Ebadi highlights the inevitable between women's rights and regime change in Iran in an interview with +972 Magazine:

Shirin Ebadi – Diaspora

> "They (the regime) know that if women win, it would be the first step towards democratisation of Iran" (Ebadi, 2022)

By bridging the frame of women's progress to the broader, globally salient goal of democracy, Ebadi expands the potential support base, demonstrating how the movement's cause resonates with existing concerns both domestically and internationally. This means that, rather than treating women's rights as a separate or secondary issue, Ebadi positions feminist demands as inseparable from political transformation. This finding is significant for understanding the evolution of Iranian feminism, as previously, although women participated in large-scale protests, women's rights concerns were often secondary to class issues and anti-imperialist resistance, frequently subordinated to larger revolutionary agendas (Moqadam, 2025, p.7). Consolidating this finding, Ebadi further emphasises:

Shirin Ebadi – Diaspora

> "I have no doubt that democracy in Iran will arrive through women" (Ebadi, 2022)

Ebadi's insights reflect earlier scholarship predicting the impact of globalisation on feminist transformations. Moghadam (2018) argues that with the global diffusion of feminism and the international spread of feminist ideology, states are increasingly likely to include women's rights on both global and national agendas. Furthermore, she predicts that when revolutionary movements, state-building efforts, or national agendas are being formulated, there is a greater likelihood that women and feminist concerns will be formally considered as part of these processes (Moghadam, 2018, p.40). Essentially, she highlights a shift in which feminism is no longer peripheral but is systematically integrated into political transformation and social change initiatives.

This finding underscores a key local adaptation within Iran's WLF: whereas women's rights and feminism may be incorporated into state-building agendas in democratic or secular contexts, for Iranian women, meaningful inclusion within the global feminist momentum necessitated framing democratic revolution itself as central feminist demands. Additionally, a similar connection is identified in Beidollahkhani and Farkhari's (2024) study of Iranian Twitter spaces during the 2022 WLF movement, where 25% of opposition tweets against the Islamic Republic referenced women-related issues (Beidollahkhani & Farkhari, 2024, p.16). The most frequently repeated signifier across these tweets was the violation of women's right to choose their own cover. Taken together, these findings illustrate the hijab as a central focal point of pro-democracy currents, demonstrating that the feminist and democratic agenda in Iran are intrinsically linked (Beidollahkhani & Farkhari, 2024, p.16).

Furthermore, revolutionary frames were also evident within the local activist sample. For instance, Narges Mohammadi characterises the WLF movement as revolutionary in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

Narges Mohammadi – Local

> "The world observes that the revolutionary movement of *Woman, Life, Freedom* continues its campaign and resistance in Iran and is a hard struggle for the survival and the real *life* of

society. The strength of this movement lies in the agency of Iranian women" (Mohammadi, 2023)

Mohammadi frames the WLF movement explicitly as revolutionary, positioning Iranian women as central to that demand. Again, this reflects a broader historical pattern within Iranian protest culture, in which revolution has consistently functioned as both a strategy and a necessity. From the 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women were present and active participants, exemplified by the International Women's Day protests of 1979, which mobilised at least 50,000 participants (Afary and Anderson, 2023, p.83). Yet, as noted earlier, women's demands were among the first to be sidelined in the aftermath of both revolutions (Moghaddam, 2024). Miriam Cooke (2016) identifies a similar pattern across the Arab world, observing that women are "in when they're needed; they're out when they're not" (Cooke, 2016, p.31). Against this historical backdrop, Mohammadi's emphasis on women as the strength of WLF signals a significant discursive shift, positioning women and feminist ideas as the very medium through which revolutionary change can occur. Moreover, the local sample underscores that the future and safety of Iranian women cannot be secured under the Islamic Republic:

Fatemeh Sepehri – Local

"They've now killed Mahsa, a few years ago they killed Miss Zahra Kazimi under the same circumstances. Girls their age are not the first and will not be the last to be killed, that's why people who had even the smallest bit of hope (we never had any hope anyway), that's why we say this regime must go" (Sepehri, 2022)

Here, she constructs a chain of repeating injustices that transforms individual loss into collective grievance for Iranian women. Addressing international news outlet, Iran International, amplifies this discursive move. Speaking to a global audience not only internationalises the pattern of state brutality but also solicits transnational recognition and solidarity, framing local suffering legible as a human-rights emergency rather than a private tragedy. The rhetoric of recurrence *'are not the first and will not be the last',* produces urgency and moral imperative, justifying regime change as the necessary outcome of WLF's feminist demands. In addition, Hedayat highlights the feminist demands of the protestors cannot be met without regime change:

Bahareh Hedayat – Local

"Both moving in the direction of meeting these demands and resisting them will demolish the structure. Therefore, revolution is inevitable" (Hedayat, 2022)

Unlike in liberal democracies, where bodily autonomy is typically framed as an individual matter or treated as a 'personal freedom,' the discourse in Iran positions it as intrinsically linked to resistance against the state, where personal freedoms directly challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Strategic acts of visibility, such as unveiling or cutting one's hair in public, signify not only feminist resistance but also anti-regime activism within Iranian protest culture. As Moghaddam (2024) notes, Iran's mandatory hijab serves as "an identity symbol for the Islamic Republic" (Moghaddam, 2024, p.135); therefore, demands for choice in dress are inherently tied to demands for regime change. Importantly, given the resilience of the mandatory hijab since 1983, overturning the hijab law would necessitate the establishment of a new regime—an understanding consistently reflected in the discourse analysed. While transnational feminist strategies, as outlined in the Global Rights Frames and Feminist Solidarity Frames, are effective in increasing WLF's visibility, the local sample recognises that such activism alone does not necessarily lead to improved socio-political conditions without broader structural change (Alrasheed & Lim, 2018, p.463).

6.6 Key Takeaways

Four key takeaway points are identified for consideration, forming the basis for interpretation and discussion in Section 7.2. These points summarise the main insights from the critical discourse analysis and highlight the overarching trends and implications to be explored in greater depth:

Global Rights Frames: Activists strategically employ international human rights discourse to legitimise Iranian feminist claims, situating local struggles within transnational norms and appealing to global audiences for solidarity and recognition.

Feminist Solidarity Frames: Both diaspora and local activists emphasise cross-border feminist connections, challenging cultural relativist narratives and demonstrating that the struggle for women's rights in Iran resonates with broader feminist movements worldwide.

Bodily Autonomy Frames: The demand for control over one's body, particularly regarding the compulsory hijab, operates as both a feminist and anti-regime statement, highlighting the inseparability of personal freedoms from political resistance under authoritarian rule.

Revolutionary Frames: Revolutionary change is framed as a local precondition for achieving women's rights in Iran, with activists positioning feminist progress as intrinsically linked to the dismantling of the existing regime, reflecting a locally adapted strategy distinct from feminist activism in liberal democracies.

CHAPTER 7
Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Thesis

In conclusion, this thesis has examined the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement as a case study of transnational feminist praxis under authoritarian, religious fundamentalist conditions. Employing Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, guided by frame alignment theory, the study analysed how Iranian feminist activists strategically amplify WLF's feminist message, situating it at the intersection of local resistance and global feminist discourse. Four dominant discursive frames were identified: (1) Global Rights Frames, (2) Feminist Solidarity Frames, (3) Bodily Autonomy Frames, and (4) Revolutionary Frames. The WLF movement provides a compelling lens for examining feminist activism under locally restrictive conditions. In an era of heightened global connectivity, this thesis has interrogated whether feminist movements in such contexts can maintain a distinctly local character or are inevitably shaped by, and contribute to, transnational feminist currents. A key contribution of this study lies in illuminating the specific adaptations required to cultivate a transnational feminist praxis under authoritarian conditions, while highlighting the continuities that link Iranian activism to broader global feminist struggles. Chapter 4 traced the historical trajectory of Iranian feminism from Pahlavi Iran (1925–1979) through the early Islamic Republic (1979–1990s), situating the WLF movement within a long-standing struggle over women's dress and bodily autonomy. Next, Chapter 5 examined the global feminist trends circulating during WLF's emergence, highlighting a landscape increasingly shaped by transnational networks, digital activism, and shared claims to bodily autonomy across borders. These dynamics directly informed the movement's discursive framing, international

visibility, and strategic deployment of feminist language. By juxtaposing Iran's history of state control over women's bodies with these global currents, it becomes evident that WLF operates at the intersection of local and transnational feminist praxis.

7.2 Discussion of Findings

In this thesis, it has been argued that postmodernist conceptions of local–global binaries inadequately capture the dynamics of Iranian feminism. Unsurprisingly, WLF participants consistently framed their struggle using global human rights language, which emerged as the most dominant reference across the corpus, accounting for 46% of the 96 coded extracts. The prevalence of this frame challenges postmodernist accounts that emphasise divides among feminists based on geography or cultural background. Activists within this frame frequently highlighted the intersection of WLF's women's rights agenda with broader human rights and global justice concerns, invoking normative values such as democracy, ethics, equality, and human rights. The universal resonance of these values suggests the strategic use of frame extension (Snow et al., 1986), deliberately broadening the movement's appeal and reinforcing its relevance within global justice frameworks. Notably, the local feminist sample engaged with this frame with significant frequency, though in contextually distinct ways: diaspora activists-oriented discourse toward formal international channels and legal reforms, whereas local activists, despite heightened risk, linked uniquely Iranian conditions, such as mandatory hijab and state violence, to broader democratic and freedom-oriented goals.

Secondly, Iranian feminists demonstrated a consistent awareness of the global feminist community and actively encouraged its support. Within the feminist solidarity frame, 92% of references came from diaspora activists, reflecting their cross-cultural positioning and access to transnational networks. This pattern underscores a strategic shift away from state-centered advocacy toward horizontal, transnational forms of feminist activism. Across the corpus, appeals for gender reform were consistently directed at the international rights community and global feminists, rather than the Islamic Republic, highlighting the movement's reliance on transnational networks where domestic avenues for reform are blocked. By contrast, local activists acknowledged the existence of a global feminist community far less explicitly. This discrepancy may be attributed to the constraints of state surveillance, which limits public engagement with international networks, or to the mediated nature of global feminist discourse, often circulated through social media and other digital platforms to which imprisoned activists have restricted access.

A third key finding of this study is that WLF activists consistently framed the movement as a struggle for bodily autonomy, which served as a central mechanism for constructing solidarity and shared feminist values. References to bodily autonomy appeared 22 times across the corpus, with a near-even distribution between local and diaspora activists, contrasting with the diaspora-dominated feminist solidarity frame. Both groups positioned bodily autonomy as a core concern, linking local struggles, particularly the mandatory hijab, to broader feminist claims for choice. Within the local sample, references emphasised the hijab's historical persistence and framed its rejection not merely as a personal or feminist demand but as a symbolic act requiring systemic regime change. This intersection of bodily autonomy and revolutionary frames demonstrated that in Iran, control over the body functions simultaneously as a feminist claim and a revolutionary imperative, effectively collapsing the boundary between individual women's rights and political transformation.

Finally, revolutionary frames appeared 15 times across the sample, with activists explicitly framing WLF as a democratic and feminist revolution. This framing positions feminist progress as inseparable from broader democratic transformation in Iran, contrasting sharply with Western feminist contexts, where revolution often serves merely as a backdrop to feminist demands. In WLF, however, revolution itself becomes the feminist demand. Historically, women's rights in Iran were frequently subordinated to class or anti-imperialist struggles, yet WLF foregrounds women's rights and feminist ideals as central to the revolutionary agenda, signalling a significant evolution in the discourse of Iranian feminist activism.

7.3 Towards a Transnational Feminist Praxis?

This study set out to examine how Iranian feminist activism has evolved under authoritarian constraint and in the context of globalisation, focusing on the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Guided by the research question, how does the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement reflect an evolving transnational feminist praxis in Iran? The findings reveal that WLF exemplifies a historically informed transnational feminist praxis. Long-standing local feminist struggles over autonomy have been strategically reframed through globally resonant feminist discourse, enhancing both visibility and solidarity beyond Iran's borders. Iranian feminists, particularly in the diaspora, leverage transnational networks to cultivate global support and legal reform, while local activists embed these global frames within their

immediate sociopolitical realities, highlighting the interplay between local specificity and transnational resonance.

Ultimately, the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom movement illustrates the fluidity and adaptability of feminist expression in highly repressive contexts, such as Iran. Collectively, the frames reveal Iranian feminism as both resilient and adaptable, bridging local specificity with global resonance to constitute an emergent transnational feminist praxis. In doing so, WLF challenges postmodernist paradigms that overemphasise local difference and are insufficient for capturing the transnational character of contemporary Iranian feminism. The findings underscore the permeability of global feminist boundaries, demonstrating that transnational feminism can emerge, operate, and evolve even under authoritarian conditions.

7.4 Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

While this study provides a detailed analysis of Iranian feminist discourse during the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement, it was constrained by the availability of ethically accessible material from the local activist sample. Although the corpus included insightful excerpts, richer and more opinionated sources, particularly from prominent local activists such as Bahareh Hedayat, would have allowed for a more comprehensive coding and deeper understanding of local perspectives. Future research could build on this study by obtaining ethical approval to access more in-depth materials from local participants, such as conducting interviews, providing a fuller representation of activist discourse under authoritarian conditions. Expanding the dataset in this way would not only enhance the depth of critical discourse analysis but also strengthen comparative studies between diaspora and local activism, further illuminating the evolution of transnational feminist praxis in restrictive contexts.

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