

The Bridges of Intersectionality and Fallacy: Unveiling Feminism's Global Paradox

July 15, 2015. Tehran, Iran.

In the scorching Tehran heat of 105 degrees Fahrenheit, I grappled with regret over choosing a polystyrene hijab instead of my cousin's recommended cotton one. The relentless sun had my hijab sitting uncomfortably on my head. Despite my aunt's headache, she handed me some money, urging me to buy ice cream down the street. She wanted to nap, trusting me to go alone. "You should be fine," she lamented, "Make sure your hijab is on properly," worry stitched into her eyes as she handed me the money.

Eager to escape the oppressive heat, I rushed out, barely registering my aunt's caution. My sole focus was on finding relief in the form of my favorite Persian pistachio and coconut ice cream. I sprinted down the street, ordered the dessert, and paused to admire a local bakery. The rhythmic motions of bakers inside captivated me. An older Iranian man read a book on a nearby bench, while women in black chadors walked with groceries in hand down the street.

I hadn't even finished my ice cream when a looming shadow and a rough hand abruptly interrupted me, grabbing my shoulder and causing the remnants of my dessert to splatter on the pavement. An irate man, adorned in a dark green khaki uniform with the Iranian national flag insignia, confronted me, demanding the whereabouts of my hijab.

Confusion swept over me.

Where is my hijab? It's on my head! What is he talking about?

Panic surged as I touched my head.

Oh no.

I didn't feel my hijab, only my black hair. Glancing around, I saw that it had fallen near a tree, most likely when I had run down the street. People around me hastily distanced themselves. The bakery sign changed from "open" to "closed." The women in black chadors hurried down the street, and the older Iranian man stopped reading, looking up.

Fueled by derogatory Farsi, the man berated me, yanking my arm and grabbing my hair. Amid the profanity, I stumbled, scraping my knee. Tears streamed down, and my voice felt choked. The man dragged me toward a van, still screaming, intending to throw me in the back.

This can't be happening...

We were very close to the van.

No! I wanted to cry out. Let me go, you asshole!

But nothing came out except choked sobs.

The older Iranian man quickly appeared, holding my fallen hijab, and claiming I was his granddaughter. I stood still, the officer still holding my hair. He quickly began talking, and the officer after giving him a scrutinizing look, let go of me and threw me forward. Then a forceful slap met my cheek, and the officer reprimanded him for not teaching me Islamic decency. By that point my lip was bleeding and my scalp burning before the officer retreated toward the van. Nothing was said between us as the older man guided me back to my aunt's house, nodding at her when she opened the door, solemnly looking at my bruised face. For the rest of the day we watched TV and she iced my face.

I left Iran that summer for the States but an unsettling presence lingered with me—an intangible shadow trailing behind me in my daily life. Even as I decorated my room with posters of Rosie the Riveter, the mother of feminism herself, Mary Wollstonecraft, and began joining groups such as the National Organizations for Women, I kept feeling that strange feeling which only grew stronger, especially in moments of freedom I had not experienced while in Iran.

What I did not know was that what I was feeling wouldn't make sense until seven years later when Iran erupted into massive protests. These protests, unprecedented since the 1979 revolution, exploded after the death of a twenty two -year-old Kurdish Iranian woman named Masha Amini at the hands of the morality police for wearing her hijab improperly. They also proved to be one of the most painful lessons of ethics for me.

That morning on day sixty eight of the protests, I found myself glued to my phone for hours on end, closely watching the news of the demonstrations in Iran following Amini's tragic death. My aunt diligently updated me on the situation by sharing images of Iranian women taking to the streets and chanting “zan, zengi, azadi!” Women. Life. Freedom. Learning about what happened to Masha Amini evoked intense grief for me; we were both the same age, both having faced the morality police, yet with different outcomes.

I survived, she did not. And it was all too personal for me.

On the first days when the protests unfolded, I struggled to articulate my range of emotions to well-meaning friends. It was a mistake as they instead questioned my emotional turmoil, with one even emphasizing that I should be grateful for the “new” freedoms I enjoyed living in the USA.

Yes, I should have been happy for these “new” freedoms but I was not. And I wanted to understand why my distress was so profound.

¹According to the view of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the source of my distress could be understood in the framework called feminist ethics. Feminist ethics is a twofold framework that aims to rethink traditional ethics, particularly where it depreciates or devalues women's moral experience. The feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar criticized traditional ethics,

¹ Rosemarie Tong and Nancy Williams, "Feminist Ethics," Plato.stanford.edu, no. 2017 Winter Edition (May), <https://plato.stanford.edu/Archives/Win2017/entries/feminism-ethics/#:~:text=Feminist%20Ethics%20is%20an%20attempt>.

particularly Western and White feminism, as having let women down in multiple ways, by neglecting or ignoring them beyond its borders.

This framework highlights that without feminist ethics, women's experiences are devalued, implying that some women's moral journeys are considered unworthy. Hence, embracing intersectionality is essential for understanding global women's struggles and avoiding a singular narrative that undermines diverse experiences. Every feminist has an ethical duty to show solidarity across borders, irrespective of the specific movement. Silence is seen as inadvertently accepting and contributing to the harmful status quo affecting women worldwide.

In my naivety, I had the initial expectations of global feminists rejoicing in solidarity with Iranian women, doing everything they could to support them. Instead, the world's leading feminist figures remained conspicuously quiet and support was more symbolic and at times non-existent, causing my frustration to mount.

*Why are global feminists so silent on the world's first ever counter revolution led by women?*²

I asked myself as I scrolled through my phone noticing the lack of news articles, posts, comments, about the protests.

² Sepideh Alassi, "Are Iran Protests Turning into the First Female-Led Revolution?: Gender Campus," www.gendercampus.ch, December 2022, <https://www.gendercampus.ch/en/blog/post/are-iran-protests-turning-into-the-first-female-led-revolution>.

As I was sitting in my living room, upset by the lack of support, a hidden thought came into my mind making me sick to my stomach. The protests had shown me something that I was just too blind to see at first.

They revealed to me that global feminism does not diverge from the ethical framework advocated by feminist ethics. Rather, it instead falls under the actions of white and western feminism, and the exclusion or insufficient support for diverse voices within existing feminist movements. This discrepancy creates a sense of fallacy, generating paradoxical experiences for women worldwide and creating ethical implications affecting them in the smallest and largest of ways.

This was my first lesson in the lack feminist ethics from the protests. They showed me that global feminism holds dangerous inconsistencies, breaking away from the feminist ethical framework and instead negatively impacts women worldwide.

Worse, I had unknowingly contributed to this broken framework.

How I learned that I contributed to this broken framework of feminism was on the morning of the hundredth day of the protests. My contribution was blind arrogance of promoting everything that feminist ethics demanded the opposite of me. I began to post anything to help garner attention for Iranian women and that morning, I placed a video anonymously that my aunt sent

me of students burning their hijab, and chanting “zan, zendegi, azadi!” at Shiraz University.

The comments caught my attention.

“F*** the morality police” That one brought a smile to my face.

Yes, I thought, absolutely *f*** them*.

Then another comment.

"F*** Islam. Islam is being challenged by its victims. It's that simple," it said.

What?!

Curiosity got the best of me when I clicked on it and was met with a slew of sub comments that I wish I didn't open.

"I call bulls**t on anyone who says that forcing women to wear the hijab and restricting women's freedom to wear it is really the same thing."

The frustration pushed me to consider responding vehemently as tears streamed down my face.

Yes, it is the same thing! This is all about choice! How hard is it to understand that!?! Take your Islamophobia elsewhere you jerk!

I closed the tab and took a deep breath. How was it that outside of Iran, the protests were not seen as a call for women’s liberation, but instead more of a liberation from Islam? Another notification met me, and this time it was from Chopra Priyanka. I clicked the comment open.

“Women in Iran and around the world are standing up and raising their voices, publicly cutting their hair and many other forms of protest for Masha Amini whose young life was taken away so brutally by the Iranian Morality police for wearing her hijab improperly.”³

The post initially felt encouraging. It seemed that Priyanka had a better understanding of why the women of Iran were on the streets. As I once again glanced down at the comments, a sickening feeling settled in my stomach. My finger paused midair. But the comments weren't Islamophobic.

“Hypocrite,” the first comment said, “Where the f*** are you when the girls in India wanted to keep their hijabs? #hijabismyright.” As someone who thought I was socially and politically aware, I was startled by this.

What was this user talking about?

³ Rayane Tamer, “Priyanka Chopra Showed Solidarity with Iranian Women. But She’s Been Criticised for Ignoring Another Plight,” SBS News, October 12, 2022, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/priyanka-chopra-showed-solidarity-with-iranian-women-but-shes-been-criticised-for-ignoring-another-plight/cy00fubpo>.

I clicked, and found myself overwhelmed with hundreds of articles about India's hijab ban. I was horrified to read about how India's Karnataka high court banned the hijab and images of young Indian girls trying to keep their head scarves on their heads as Hindu nationalists tried to snatch them off. Many girls were holding signs saying "Hijab is my right." and "Hands off my Hijab!"⁴ I hated my hijab, but this made me feel ill in ways that I had not felt before. I couldn't imagine mine being ripped off my head. My scalp suddenly burned remembering the officer's fingers tugging at my hair. I didn't want any girl to have that horrible sensation on her head.

Worse, these articles weren't from years ago. They were happening at the same time the Iranian protests were happening. My spit felt sticky in my mouth when another article caught my attention. When I clicked on it, it led me to another rabbit hole of articles about France's hijab ban for the 2024 Paris Olympics and the UN demand to revise the new rule. The bans didn't receive the same media coverage as the Iranian protests. In fact, the bans were praised.⁵

I nearly dropped my phone from the nausea washing over me.

For about two hours, I kept googling and found more articles like many hands tugging at me in different directions. At the same time the protests were happening in Iran, as Iranian women were gaining world's attention, Afghan women were inspired by the women of Iran but the West

⁴ The Associated Press, "India Court Upholds a Ban on Hijab in Schools and Colleges," NPR, March 15, 2022, sec. Asia, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/15/1086602745/india-court-upholds-ban-on-hijab-in-schools-and-colleges>.

⁵ Chris Liakos and Maya Szaniecki, "UN Slams France's Decision to Ban French Athletes' Hijabs at 2024 Olympics," CNN, September 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/26/europe/un-hijab-olympics-intl/index.html>.

ignored them as they had given up on them after twenty years of conflict. Their cries of “zan, zendeig, azadi!” were literally falling on deaf ears outside the Iranian Embassy in Kabul.⁶

My eyes frantically read articles from Kurdish women angrily writing how the world’s feminists had ignored that at the heart of these Iranian protests were started by Kurdish women in Iran. And that the words I had so proudly posted among hundreds of thousands internationally, “zan, zendgi, azadi,” was really rooted in Kurdish feminist thought, “jin, jiyar, azadi” in response to persecution from the government of Iran. For them, the Iranian feminist movement was easing the feminist history of Kurdish women. It was a reflection of Iran’s systemic erasures of the Kurdish people. While the world only chanted her Iranian name, Masha Amini, they ignored her Kurdish identity “Jina.”⁷

Feeling overwhelmed, I quietly turned off my phone and stared at the black screen. My initial jubilation about the protests gaining global attention had transformed into a profound awareness that the cries of hundreds of women from around the world were ignored, all for the same cries of freedom.

The weight of the distorted narrative dampened my enthusiasm for global feminists advocating for Iranian women. The realization that numerous voices were being overlooked intensified the injustice. The protests were not about intersectionality. With four diverse groups—Afghan women, French and Indian Muslim girls, and Kurdish women, all protesting alongside Iranian

⁶ Kourosh Ziabari, "Women in Afghanistan Are Inspired, Emboldened by Protests in Iran," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, February 1, 2023, <https://agsiw.org/women-in-afghanistan-are-inspired-emboldened-by-protests-in-iran/>.

⁷ Arwa Hussain, "Opinion: Women’s Freedom, Not Hijab, Is the Issue in Iran," Montrealgazette, September 22, 2022, <https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-womens-freedom-not-hijab-is-the-issue-in-iran>.

women—they were fading into the background. While global feminists gradually expressed support for Iranian women, they marginalized the struggles of other women worldwide.

The troubling juxtaposition of their actions raised concerns for me. It wasn't Islamophobia that troubled me; rather, it was the world's selective attention to movements that aligned with a predetermined narrative. The prevailing narrative wasn't about supporting all women but adhering to a story that suited the biases of certain feminists. The selective endorsement of one woman's story over another left me conflicted and ashamed. This, I realized, was creating a paradox for women globally.

Supporting women burning their hijabs in Iran aligns with feminist principles of empowerment and resistance against oppressive regimes. However, hijab bans in countries like France and India are secular and restrict a woman's freedom to express her religious identity. The dichotomy between praising Iranian women for burning their hijabs and overlooking struggles in India and France raised unsettling questions for me. Both can not be held true in the name of women's liberation.

I too contributed to this single narrative by solely promoting Iranian women, unaware of how my small actions on social media erased one group of women while highlighting another in the same struggle. My neck turned red at my shame when I realized what I had done.

In her book "White Feminism," Koa Beck explains the unfolding phenomenon before my eyes. Beck argues what I was seeing should have not shocked me. I was a witness to white and western

feminism replicating power structures and marginalizing the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds within the feminist movement happening in Iran. This trend was evident not only among Kurdish women in Iran but also among women from India, France, and Afghanistan from their governmental hijab bans and lack of inclusion in their cries of women's liberation.⁸

The micro-movement of Kurdish women facing oppression in Iran, with their experiences ignored, mirrored the oversight of other women. Beck's analysis further explained that the structural oppression faced by these women, particularly regarding the right to choose the hijab and the celebration of bans rather than challenging them, highlights another harmful aspect of white or western feminism. The aspect that tends to prioritize the perspectives and issues of privileged groups—white western women— and neglects the concerns of women facing intersecting forms of oppression. This narrow focus on the issues of privileged women creates inequality by failing to address the diverse experiences of women worldwide.

This new understanding lingered with me once I had closed all the tabs on my phone and sat on my chair feeling lost. I had no idea how to start to dismantle a framework that pivoted women against each other, and what my role was in all of it. The reaction of the global feminist community provided me with the second lesson of feminist ethics. I was now aware of how the feminist movement in Iran created an exclusion of support for diverse voices according to Beck's analysis from her book. The framework demanded inclusion, but I was seeing exclusion.

But what was my role in all this as a self-proclaimed feminist?

⁸ Marie Solis, "Koa Beck on Dismantling the Persistence of White Feminism," NBC News, January 9, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/koa-beck-dismantling-persistence-white-feminism-n1253555>

On day one hundred and sixty-eighth of the protests, the third and final lesson of feminist ethics was taught to me. It would shed light on what my role was in the framework. But it would take a family tragedy for that understanding to sit in. That evening, between the sods, my uncle had somehow managed to explain that my aunt had disappeared. She joined the protests as they started, but in the fourth month, she didn't come home for days. At that point my uncle realized that she was one of the many missing. Going to the Iranian police was hopeless, and he tried his best to check the local hospitals. A risky move as the regime began a cruel crackdown of checking hospitals for protestors injured. All he could do was wait for contact from her.

He also asked that we no longer stay in touch out of the fear that the government could trace our calls. Silence was now a must, and we weren't the only ones facing this dilemma. Others had begun to use other means of contact or no contact at all with loved ones inside of Iran.

This news left me feeling paralyzed, overwhelmed by a profound sense of helplessness. I had to cease posting on social media, concerned that the Iranian government might trace my family's surname on Instagram, despite my account being anonymous.

Feminist ethics stated that any feminist has an ethical obligation to show support and solidarity with any feminist movement as silence is not an option. Silence, it argued, contributes to the dangers of a collective narrative accepting the status quo. However, at the individual level, no clear guide was presented for me, confusing me about my role within the framework, and I found

myself grappling with my silence, my lack of action, and a deep sense of introvertiness I had since a child.

Having witnessed the impact of silence on an individual level in Chopra's disregard for girls in India, and the collective silence at the hands of major governments, I was determined not to be a part of that narrative. I wanted to play my role within the framework and resist accepting the status quo. However, the reality of my family's safety weighed heavily on me, turning my silence into a double-edged sword—preserving their well-being while eroding my own sense of agency within the collective feminist framework.

Was my silence inadvertently endorsing the status quo? Was I using my family as an excuse to be a bystander?

These questions echoed in my mind as I scrolled past articles detailing new internet bans imposed by the regime, further stifling Iranian protests. Comments on social media lamenting the lack of action to amplify those voices intensified my inner turmoil.

One comment, in particular, felt like a personal call-out: "If you consider yourself a feminist, you can't ignore the feminist revolution in Iran." To me, it left like it was saying:⁹

How dare you stay silent when your aunt is missing, and women around the world are being silenced and killed? What is wrong with you?

⁹ Elaine Tassy, "Iranian American Women in Colorado Reflect on the Unrest in Iran," Colorado Public Radio, December 16, 2022, <https://www.cpr.org/2022/12/16/iranian-american-women-in-colorado-reflect-on-the-unrest-in-iran/>.

I spiraled into depression for several days, unsure of what to do. What could I do in such a complex situation? I desperately wanted to find a way to speak out or offer genuine support that countered the harmful feminist narrative.

However, the truth was, I was no activist.

Being in the U.S., I felt torn between two different realities. In Iran, my role and action would be clear—I would join the protests without hesitation. Yet, being outside Iran complicated matters. Attempts to engage with my senators about what was happening in Iran were met with voicemail, and organizing my protest of eight on my small-town university campus felt like a cruel joke. As an introvert, I further struggled to find meaningful avenues that resonated with the urgency of the situation while avoiding potential harm to my family and my shy nature.

It wasn't until later in the day when what happened to me in Iran offered me the answer I was looking for. The memory was triggered when I watched a video on whatsapp of an older woman in her chador defending a younger girl who wasn't wearing her hijab from the Basji sent to me by a friend in Los Angeles.

I suddenly recalled how the older man had saved me that day. He didn't challenge the regime head on for the injustices against women, but I found a glimmer of understanding from that memory. My mistake lay in the fact that I had created the simplistic equation of voice with authority and silence with victimization for the feminist ethics framework. I had wrongly

believed that silence meant an absence of voice, when it can be a powerful avenue to express power. And in my case, it was the only option I had.

My role didn't need to be a grand public display of protests like the ones that I was seeing in major cities all over the world. I realized that feminists can express themselves quietly. My introversion should not be equated with silence, just as being loud does not necessarily equate to strength. One can be vocal without being loud, and as an introvert myself, I realized that one should not fear being misunderstood or automatically being seen as accepting the status quo. Instead, my silence and shy nature could be used to harness these characteristics as strengths to empower the movement and fulfill themselves.

I did this in the best way that I knew every day when I rode the train from school. Every morning, I said the names of young girls who had lost their lives in the protests, and the names of protestors facing execution in Iran. I said the names of Indian and French activists who wanted the hijab to be a right for them. I said the names of Kurdish women who had lost their lives to the regime, including saying the full name Jina Masha Amini in the hopes to keep her Kurdish identity alive as well, wanting to show that I heard and finally understood their struggles.

I continued to say their names and added my aunt's when I learned that she had become one of the many deceased because of protests. I still say their names, even after the protests ended.

It was the least I could do as I learned that silent solidarity was my only option. I would be lying to you if I said that my actions felt enough. There are many days that I had a deep yearning to do

more than silent solidarity and take a torch to those who were not contributing to the collective pursuit of gender equality and instead exploiting fallacies and paradoxes in the name of global women's liberation. A burning torch to those who broke feminist ethics and inflicted pain on women worldwide by picking and choosing women's movements, by voicing support for one group of women over another.

That torch still burns inside of me. And this torch of fire is dedicated to the resilient spirits of women who find themselves in oppressive circumstances, their voices muffled within a fractured feminist framework. We should understand that we are united as women, as life, as beings yearning for freedom. I hope in this unity lies the strength to mend the broken pieces toward a more inclusive feminist framework for women globally. I know that my aunt would have wanted me too.

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