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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mehan, A. (2024). Digital Feminist Placemaking: The Case of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement. *Urban Planning*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.7093>

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Digital Feminist Placemaking: The Case of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

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Submitted: 28 April 2023 **Accepted:** 17 August 2023 **Published:** 16 January 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Citizen Participation, Digital Agency, and Urban Development” edited by Simone Tappert (University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland), Asma Mehan (Texas Tech University), Pekka Tuominen (University of Helsinki), and Zsuzsanna Varga (University of Glasgow), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i327>

Abstract

Throughout Iran and various countries, the recent calls of the “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi” (in Persian), “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” (in Kurdish), or “Woman, Life, Freedom” (in English) movement call for change to acknowledge the importance of women. While these feminist protests and demonstrations have been met with brutality, systematic oppression, and internet blackouts within Iran, they have captured significant social media attention and coverage outside the country, especially among the Iranian diaspora and various international organizations. This article, grounded in feminist urban theories of the Global South, analyzes the digital feminist placemaking movement in Iran. As the first counter-revolution led by women, the movement utilizes digital art, graffiti, and protest movements to embody women’s solidarity groups and sympathy rallies. Our analysis employs various digital research methods, including social media scrutiny and the study of protest illustrations. Analyzing the digital feminist placemaking in Iran will enable us to compare the commonalities, differences, challenges, and opportunities between the minorities and majorities in the world’s countries. The outcomes of this research can help international organizations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations Agency for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (UN Women), as well as policymakers, institutions, academics, and NGOs, to highlight the various ways in which broader public participation could be encouraged in the process of digital feminist insurgent placemaking.

Keywords

digital art; digital graffiti; digital placemaking; feminist placemaking; Iranian feminist movements

1. Introduction

Drawing insights from critical sociologists and feminist geographers regarding the gendered aspects of public spaces, this article explores the gender-segregated spaces in Iran as a multivalent, ongoing social process (Lefebvre, 2009; Mehan, 2023a; Mehan & Rossi, 2019; Zamani & Mehan, 2019). This study employs process-based sociology to understand historical, societal, and cultural shifts, giving analytical priority to describing the properties of a generative process or chain of events (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

In recent years, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has witnessed a powerful feminist wave advocating for women's rights and gender equality (Mehan, 2017, 2019). Specifically, in Iran, a significant feminist movement emerged, underscored by the slogan "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" in Persian, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" in Kurdish, or "Woman, Life, Freedom" in English. This movement was ignited by the tragic death of 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini in September 2022, who was in the custody of Iran's "morality police" for alleged violations of hijab regulations. Despite facing brutal repression, systematic oppression, and internet blackouts, the movement gained international attention, especially among the Iranian diaspora and various international organizations. Against a universal understanding of women's revolutionary practices in democratic settings, it is crucial to note that these may not be applicable under non-democratic conditions (Bayat, 2007, p. 160). As Bayat (1997) elaborates, women in authoritarian settings encounter considerable challenges in organizing and mobilizing through traditional means.

In this article, digital feminist placemaking refers to Iranian women's creative utilization of digital platforms to advocate for their rights and promote social change. This encompasses various activities such as digital protests, demonstrations, information kiosks, murals, graffiti, and digital art strategies. These digital placemaking practices empower women to surpass government limitations and express themselves freely.

To investigate this phenomenon, this article seeks to answer three central research questions:

RQ1: How have Iranian women utilized digital platforms to advocate for their rights and promote social change in gender-segregated spaces and oppressive conditions?

RQ2: What strategies and tactics have proved most effective in the digital feminist placemaking movement in Iran?

RQ3: What do these digital feminist placemaking practices present regarding challenges and opportunities?

To answer these questions, this study examines multiple case studies demonstrating how these tactics enable Iranian women to claim ownership of public spaces, amplify their voices, challenge traditional power structures, and drive change.

This article is an outcome of a collective attempt to navigate the complex, uneven literature of feminist placemaking studies in Iran, particularly in response to the recent Woman, Life, Freedom feminist movement. Instead of solid and conclusive outcomes, this article focuses on processes that highlight the complex, multilayered, and nuanced relationship that arises from studying layered interactions between gender, public

space, religion, and the state. The aim is to identify commonalities, differences, challenges, and opportunities in these practices and suggest ways to encourage broader public participation. The findings of this research can benefit policymakers, institutions, academics, and NGOs in their efforts to promote inclusive and empowering feminist urban spaces.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section explores the intersection of feminism, digital technologies, and geographic scholarship in the MENA region, focusing on feminist insurgent placemaking and its digital practices (Harvey, 2013; Mehan, 2023b; Mehan & Nawrotek, 2023; Soja, 2010).

To provide a comprehensive understanding of placemaking, it is crucial to refer to theorists such as Gieryn (2000), who has emphasized the significance of physical places in the social sciences. Gieryn's conceptualization of place as a socio-cultural phenomenon can serve as a foundation to further delve into the realm of feminist placemaking, providing a clearer framework to comprehend the concept in the context of physical spaces. In his view, placemaking encompasses physical modifications and embedding social narratives, historical events, and cultural values. This lens offers a comprehensive understanding of feminist insurgent placemaking, emphasizing its potential to reshape and imbue spaces with feminist ideals.

Digital placemaking is an extension of placemaking principles into the digital realm. It employs digital tools, technologies, and strategies to enhance and influence physical spaces and foster community engagement (Mostafavi & Mehan, 2023). In addition, digital placemaking encompasses various activities such as digital protests, demonstrations, murals, graffiti, art, and e-petition strategies. Although based in the digital domain, these activities have tangible impacts on the physical world and significantly contribute to shaping public spaces (Varış Husar et al., 2023).

Adding another layer to this discussion, "feminist digital geographies" is a term that scrutinizes how digital technologies shape gender relations, identities, and inequalities. Furthermore, it explores how these technologies can challenge traditional gender norms and promote feminist ideologies, underscoring the interplay of gender, space, and digital technologies (Tong, 2009, pp. 71–72).

This concept draws from Lefebvre's (1991) idea of counter-space, where space is seen as a social product and a tool for challenging established power structures. It also relates to Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counter-public, where marginalized groups form parallel discursive arenas to articulate their interests and needs.

The literature review delves into the historical perspective of feminist placemaking in Iran, gender segregation policies in contemporary Iran, and feminist insurgent placemaking and its digital practices in the MENA region. By focusing on these themes, the review provides a comprehensive understanding of feminist insurgent placemaking and its digital dimensions within the MENA region, linking placemaking's digital and physical dimensions with broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

2.1. A Historical Perspective of Feminist Placemaking in Iran

Compared to other countries in the MENA region, Iran's feminist placemaking has a lengthy and intricate history shaped by the country's feminist movement and marked by political, social, and cultural changes (Nawratek & Mehan, 2020). Throughout much of the 19th century, public spaces in Iran were predominantly male territories. However, towards the end of the Qajar dynasty, women's confinement within private spaces was challenged for the first time. Concurrently, efforts were made to transform public order by creating women-only spaces, theaters, and presses (Mehan et al., 2022; Najmabadi, 1991; Navai, 2014; Rostam-Kolayi, 2008).

The advent of modern discourse prompted a paradigm shift in discourse and practices around gender boundaries (Thompson, 2003). This shift, led by modernizing tendencies, aimed to dissolve the segregation between men and women, aspiring to create a "modern," heterosocial public sphere within the traditionally male-dominated public realm (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Amin, 2002).

The Pahlavi era (1925–1979) expanded state-level modernizing discourse, primarily focusing on the emancipatory effects of gender desegregation and mandatory unveiling (Mehan, 2023c). The state used women's dress codes to signify Iran's modern and progressive political agenda (Tohidi, 2002). During this period, the women's rights movement in Iran took shape, with many women advocating for greater rights, educational spaces, consumption, freedoms, and representation. Influenced by Western feminist movements, a group of educated, upper-middle-class women campaigned for voting rights, education, and employment opportunities. They also aimed to improve the status of women in Iranian society, focusing on issues like education, voting, and property rights. Despite some progress, their efforts were hindered by Iranian society's patriarchal and conservative nature (Mehan, 2022; Rajendran et al., 2021).

The second wave of the women's rights movement in Iran emerged in the 1960s as a new generation challenged traditional roles and expectations. Influenced by factors such as the spread of Western feminism, increased education and employment opportunities for women, the rise of an urban middle class, and growing awareness of human rights and gender equality, women began advocating for expanded rights and opportunities in various fields, including education, employment, and political participation. Despite ongoing challenges, women had made considerable progress in these areas by the 1970s.

The next section will focus on contemporary Iran, examining gendered placemaking agencies through various case studies.

2.2. Gender Segregation Policies in Contemporary Iran

The contemporary feminist movement in Iran has been shaped by several factors, including the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the ongoing struggle for democracy, and the evolving role of women in modern Iranian society (Jaynes, 1979). The Islamic Republic has imposed a patriarchal model of gender roles on Iranian women, restricting their education, employment opportunities, and political participation (Sciolino, 1992, 2003). Consequently, women's presence in the public sphere, including the workforce and political life, has been significantly curtailed (Hosseini, 2019).

A notable manifestation of this patriarchal agenda was Ayatollah Khomeini's call for women to wear the chador, a long black veil covering the body, exposing only the face. The chador became symbolic of the revolution and part of the state's strategy for gender segregation in public spaces (Moghadam, 2004; Shahrokni, 2019). Checkpoints were established at entrances to universities, shopping malls, airports, theaters, and government buildings to prevent unrelated men and women from mingling, thereby enforcing gender segregation and upholding notions of morality. Despite these restrictions, feminist movements in Iran have persistently challenged the state's patriarchal policies. Women have employed various forms of resistance, such as wearing colorful coats and scarves instead of the chador, to reclaim public spaces (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006).

On March 8, 1979, thousands of women marched from Tehran University with their heads uncovered, protesting mandatory veiling, and rejecting the prescribed notion of womanhood defined by religion (Moghissi, 2009). However, these efforts were met with an accelerated expansion of gender-segregated spaces (Tahar et al., 2023). The state has established women-only spaces, including buses, metro cabins, taxis, parks, cafes, restaurants, city complexes, internet cafes, and schools. Although these spaces were intended to reinforce gender segregation, they have sometimes transformed into alternative public spheres where individuals can freely express themselves and engage in different practices.

The state's gendered placemaking policies in Iran have been influenced by Foucault's concept of "pastoral power" and Young's (2003) "logic of masculinist protection," with the state positioning itself as the protector of women's bodies (Foucault, 2007). The regime shifted from exclusion, closure, and prohibition in the 1980s to inclusion, opening, and provision in the 2000s (Shahrokni, 2019, p. 20).

The state's expansion of women-only parks, cafes, restaurants, city complexes (known as *shahrbanu* in Farsi), internet cafes, schools, and universities to reinforce gender segregation reached its peak with the rise of conservative factions (Vakil, 2011). However, these women-only spaces have sometimes evolved into "alternative or distinct public spheres" due to the practices and actions of the individuals within them (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1989). Additionally, the state-enforced gender segregation policies in Iran have significantly influenced the feminist movement and the role of women in society. Despite the restrictive policies imposed by the state, feminist movements have persisted in resisting and challenging patriarchal norms, reclaiming public spaces for women (Mehan & Nawratek, 2023).

In Iran, women's resistance to patriarchal norms and their reclamation of public spaces manifests in several ways. Feminist activists protest for their rights in public spaces, and artists and writers utilize their work to challenge gender inequality. Legal initiatives are pursued to challenge oppressive policies, while increased female education is changing traditional roles. Furthermore, feminists use technology and social media as platforms for mobilization and dialogue, effectively creating virtual spaces of resistance.

These historical developments have shaped feminist placemaking in Iran, influencing how women interact with and mold public spaces. In addition to physical design, the modern era emphasizes the role of digital tools and technologies in placemaking. As digital tools have become more prevalent, they have offered new means for women to engage with public spaces but have also introduced concerns about surveillance and privacy.

The next section will focus on feminist insurgent placemaking and digital practices in the MENA region.

2.3. Feminist Insurgent Placemaking, Digital Practices, and Protest Movements in the Middle East and North Africa Region and Beyond

Feminist placemaking, rooted in Grosz's (1995) "lived space," emphasizes spaces as sociocultural constructs. Roy's (2016) postcolonial urban theory introduces complexities from historical and racial intersections. In the MENA region, feminist practices confront patriarchal norms of regimes, such as in Iran (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008). Digital tools amplify these feminist voices, addressing issues like discrimination, violence, and reproductive rights. Digital feminist placemaking creates spaces promoting gender equality, bridging physical and digital worlds, and challenging patriarchal norms (Mehan, 2023b, 2023d).

In the scholarship on digital placemaking, key arguments emphasize its potential to democratize the process of placemaking, increase community engagement, and promote inclusivity. By leveraging digital technologies, digital placemaking offers novel avenues for participation, allowing a broader spectrum of voices to be heard in shaping public spaces. Some argue that digital placemaking can create virtual or augmented experiences that transcend physical boundaries, enabling individuals to engage with public spaces in innovative and immersive ways.

Critically, digitizing everyday activities and social interactions—a cornerstone of digital placemaking—refers to increasingly integrating digital technologies into daily life. This includes online shopping, social media interactions, virtual communication, and digital content consumption. These digital practices profoundly affect how people engage with physical spaces and contribute to placemaking, further blurring the physical and digital boundaries.

Some innovative practices in modern urban development occur in placemaking processes at the intersection of the physical and digital worlds. For example, digital placemaking practices have also been employed in the MENA region to raise awareness about women's health and reproductive rights. This is achieved through interactive platforms and mobile applications that offer women private access to reproductive health and family planning resources. Feminist insurgent placemaking and digital practices have been at the forefront of many socio-spatial struggles. However, the movement faces numerous obstacles, including patriarchal cultural norms, political repression, and limited resources.

Concurrently, digital transformation affects public space dynamics, sparking debates over its role in political discourse. Scholars like Kavada (2015) have highlighted social media's pivotal role in anti-austerity movements. Similarly, Castells (2015) asserts the significance of online networks for organizing protests, while Costanza-Chock (2012) links digital tech to Occupy Wall Street mobilizations. Yet, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) caution about the individual-centric nature of such digital activism.

The hybrid reality of a social protest, consisting of both material and digital elements, constitutes the protest event. In an empirical analysis of the Syntagma Square protests in Athens, Mattoni (2020, p. 1768) posits that:

To appreciate the manifold interactions of activists with the media in an age of media abundance, we should employ an approach to social movements' culture that can grasp the nuances of activists' shared cognitive, emotional, and moral understandings and their concrete embodiments of what it takes to make a social movement occur, develop, and thrive.

In a similar study on the Taksim Square protests in Turkey in 2013, Smith et al. (2015) suggest that social media users aim to influence through vicarious experience—representing others’ experiences—rather than direct personal experience. They propose that social media is used to effect change from a distance, with content ownership and online reputation becoming driving forces of online participation in a protest movement (Smith et al., 2015, p. 499).

Countries like Poland, Russia, and India have experienced a wave of feminist digital activism, highlighting innovative tactics and engagement with creative strategies. For example, Nacher (2021) explores feminist digital activism in Poland, specifically the #BlackProtest movement, highlighting the narrative potential of hashtags and their impact on online and offline spaces. McLean (2019) discusses the concept of feminist digital spaces, providing insights into how online platforms are essential for feminist activism. Perheentupa (2021) contributes to the understanding of mediatized manifestations of feminism in the context of neoconservative Russia, shedding light on the interplay between feminist movements and digital media. Pain (2021) examines feminist digital activism within the Indian #MeToo movement, focusing on developing voices and the transformative power of digital platforms.

Consequently, an innovative interdisciplinary approach is needed to examine the complex relationships between digital media’s role in protest activity and its geographic and political contextualization (Kozlowski et al., 2020; Lokot, 2021, pp. 2–3). Studies indicate that protest activities and critical features of participation culture, such as radical inclusivity, multiple narrations, and a mosaic-like nature, are enhanced by integrating offline and online structures and mechanisms. This hybrid multiplicity provides individuals with various modes of participation and makes the potential for collective action and participatory processes accessible to diverse actors.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This section, focusing on methodology, elucidates the methodological implications of the chosen approach and demonstrates the links between the research’s purpose, guiding questions, sampling strategies, data collection, and data analysis methods.

To address the article’s research questions, a triangulation of qualitative methods was employed. In the first phase, books, journal articles, and monographs on feminist insurgent placemaking, gender segregation, placemaking policies, the Iranian feminist movement, and digital feminist placemaking practices were collected and critically reviewed. These documents were identified through a literature review of the library database at Texas Tech University in English. The large body of published resources in Farsi/Persian has also been studied to engage with local resources. This research incorporated anonymous interviews with select artists and questionnaires filled out by students during the Community Design and Development Resources course at Texas Tech University in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. Through the course, it became evident that defining “feminist urban spaces” posed a challenge due to the subjective nature of feminist placemaking, which depends largely on context analysis.

The feedback from these questionnaires and interviews played a crucial role in the final selection of representative digital art for the case study section.

From the beginning of the movement in Iran, back to September 2022, 80 social media posts related to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran were analyzed. For selecting the digital arts, other digital communication methods like emails, online forums, and digital media archives were explored alongside social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. These posts, chosen for their relevance to the research questions and high levels of engagement (likes, comments, and shares), offered substantial insights into the public discourse surrounding the movement. The selected posts, sourced from a diverse group of artists and activist groups, covered various topics such as advocacy for women's rights, personal experiences of gender segregation, calls for legal changes, expressions of solidarity, and digital art and graffiti related to the movement. The analysis of social media posts was performed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of themes within data. This involved systematically sorting and coding the data to identify recurring patterns or themes related to the research questions.

The research was also carried out under the purview of feminist methodologies, emphasizing the importance of understanding individual experiences and power dynamics in the research process. It is important to note that the data collection for this research faces several constraints due to censorship in Iran, especially regarding data linked to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

4. Context and Case Study

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran presents a compelling context for studying feminist placemaking, digital placemaking practices, and Iranian feminist movements. Incited by the tragic death of 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini at the hands of Iran's "morality police" due to an alleged hijab violation in September 2022, this movement has taken center stage in Iranian society.

Digital platforms have played an integral role in mobilizing this movement, enabling individuals to share videos of defiance against authorities, such as removing and burning headscarves and standoffs with Iranian police. As a response, the government has attempted to stifle these protests through internet blackouts, further illuminating the importance of these digital tools in propagating the movement.

Digital feminist placemaking is not restricted to Iran; it is a global phenomenon, evident in movements such as #MeToo. Commencing in 2017, this movement employed digital media to champion gender equality and female empowerment (Mehan & Rossi, 2019). By leveraging social media and hashtags, women globally shared their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, challenging the patriarchal structures that perpetuated such abuses (Mehan, 2023b).

A poignant instance of this strategy is visible in Iran, where women have employed digital media as a medium of resistance in the public sphere. The social media campaign My Stealthy Freedom, initiated in 2014, involved women posting photos of themselves with their hair unveiled, holding their hijabs aloft. They shared these images every Wednesday using the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays to protest the compulsory hijab law. This digital resistance triggered activism among Iranian women, spearheaded by a young woman's defiant stand on a utility box in Tehran's Revolution Street in December 2017. This symbolic act gave rise to a new generation of protesters, termed "daughters of the revolution," who brandished white scarves on poles as symbols of their protest. The struggle transcended the issue of the hijab and embraced broader issues concerning gender politics and state control over women's bodies.

The core demands of the movement revolve around eradicating discriminatory laws, such as the mandatory hijab law, and challenging patriarchal norms that impede women's rights and autonomy. Despite governmental attempts to quell the movement, it continues to grow and strengthen through the effective usage of digital platforms for communication, mobilization, and organization.

Moreover, the context of this movement has been enriched by previous feminist placemaking and digital activism initiatives like My Stealthy Freedom, White Wednesdays, and The Girls of Revolution Street movement. These movements have utilized digital platforms and e-petitions to promote gender equality and women's rights, demonstrating the power of digital tools in challenging patriarchal norms and creating more inclusive societies; White Wednesdays is a campaign initiated by Alinejad in 2017 that encourages Iranian women to wear white clothing or headscarves as a symbol of protest against the compulsory hijab. Participants use the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays on social media to share images and videos of their acts of defiance, creating a sense of solidarity among women across Iran. The Girls of Revolution Street movement started in 2018 when Vida Movahed climbed onto a utility box on Tehran's Enghelab Street and removed her hijab in protest. Her act inspired others to do the same, with women sharing images of their protests on social media under the hashtag #دختران_خیابان_انقلاب, which translates to "The Girls of Revolution Street." This movement highlights the power of individual acts of resistance to inspire collective action.

Simultaneously, Iranian artists have used digital art, digital graffiti, and visual expressions to express their feminist beliefs and challenge traditional gender roles. These creations are typically shared across various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as personal blogs and websites. Digital sharing enables artists to circumvent traditional barriers and censorship, extending their reach within Iran and internationally. These digital arts have raised public awareness and support for women's rights in Iran, drawing attention to the struggles faced by women and non-binary individuals and contributing to shifting public attitudes towards gender equality.

Figures 1–5 showcase numerous examples of the movement's impact, including protests, artwork, and empowering visual language. Artists such as Arghavan Khosravi, Roshni Rouzbehani, Zartosht Rahimi, Abbas Shahsavari, and Maryam Ayeen have created murals, digital graffiti, and other artworks that depict strong, independent women, claiming public spaces and challenging the status quo. This grassroots placemaking is a potent form of resistance, enabling women to demand greater visibility, inclusion, and equality in the public sphere.

The striking visual elements in Khosravi's artwork, as seen in Figure 1, reflect her commitment to catalyzing cultural transformation through visual art. Khosravi critically engages with the aesthetics of Persian miniature paintings, traditionally used to illustrate folkloric texts, where women often occupy subservient or secondary roles. Her paintings challenge this historical narrative by offering women agency and critical social significance.

A striking characteristic of Khosravi's work is its multi-dimensionality. This layering creates a shifting perceptual experience, inviting viewers to engage with the artwork from different perspectives. Khosravi employs potent visual motifs—black plumes, rockets, and cages—to allude to corrupted economic and political systems. Depictions of female bodies, often shackled or with mouths sewn shut, serve as a powerful critique of gender repression.

Thus, Arghavan Khosravi's art encapsulates the depth and complexity of the feminist struggle in Iran. Her digital graffiti demonstrates how feminist placemaking can occur within visual art, reshaping cultural narratives and challenging oppressive systems. The social media dissemination of her work extends this influence, opening avenues for national and international audiences and reflecting on Iranian gender politics today (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Arghavan Khosravi's surrealist paintings of women embody a new sense of urgency. Khosravi is influenced by Persian miniature painting and her memories of coming of age in Iran. Image courtesy of the artist.

Roshi Rouzbehani's artwork, *Free Tehran*, vividly portrays an aspiration for emancipation and envisions women celebrating their freedom above the iconic Azadi Tower in Tehran. This powerful piece, accompanied by the hashtag #MahsaAmini, references the tragic death of a young Iranian woman that ignited nationwide protests, highlighting the intersection of digital activism and the tangible struggle for women's rights. By focusing on the Azadi Tower, an urban symbol of independence, freedom, and liberation in modern Tehran, Rouzbehani's work symbolically connects the fight for gender equality with the broader quest for societal change.

Social media platforms serve as Rouzbehani's canvas, where her powerful visual narratives traverse the borders of Iran to touch a global audience. Figure 2 showcases Rouzbehani's art, which centers on empowering women and developing her unique visual language. Her focus on empowering depictions of women positions her work as a counter-narrative to the traditionally subordinate representations of women in Iranian society.

In analyzing the impact of her work, it becomes evident that Rouzbehani's art challenges societal norms and cultivates solidarity and collective action among those involved in the struggle for gender equality. The integration of her art with digital tools demonstrates these platforms' significant role in amplifying feminist discourse, enabling it to permeate beyond the confines of Iran and resonate with audiences globally.

Rouzbehani's use of digital platforms for feminist placemaking serves as a compelling example of how digital art can be used to challenge societal norms, foster solidarity, and drive the struggle for gender equality. These platforms facilitate the propagation of feminist messages and the establishment of digital communities, contributing to the ongoing fight for women's rights in Iran and beyond (see Figure 2).

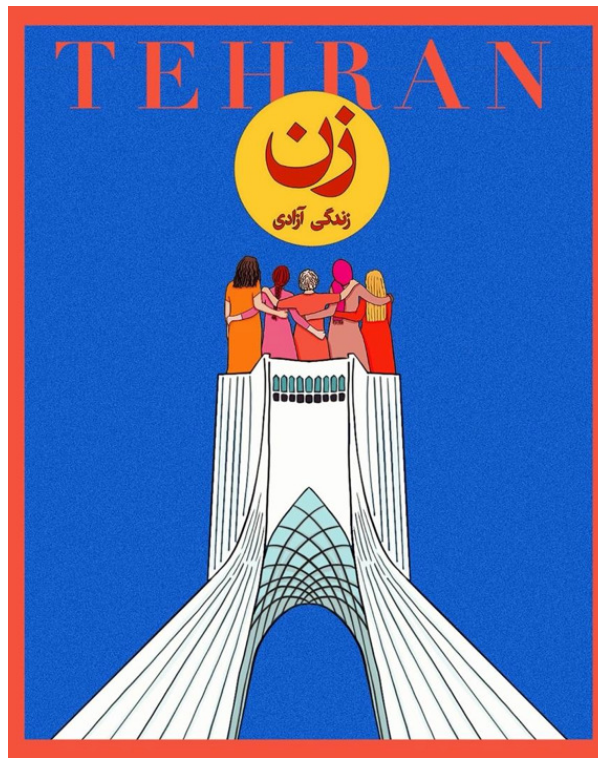


Figure 2. Roshii Rouzbehani, *Free Tehran*: Women will celebrate freedom above the Azadi Tower in Tehran one day. For Woman, Life, and Freedom. #MahsaAmini. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3 features Zartosht Rahimi's artwork dedicated to martyrs of freedom. Rahimi's artwork, titled *For All the Martyrs of Freedom*, showcases a piece called "pietà," an acrylic canvas painting measuring 100 x 80 cm (about 2.62 ft), created in 2022. In the background of the painting, the symbolic Damavand Mountain stands tall, evoking its religious significance in Iranian culture and its association with spirituality and transcendence. This inclusion adds depth and meaning to the artwork, intertwining the struggle for freedom with spiritual and religious connotations.

Zartosht Rahimi's artwork offers a unique perspective on the struggle for freedom in Iran. With hashtags like #Woman_Life_Freedom, #IranianArtist, and #pieta on his public Instagram page, Rahimi has effectively raised awareness of this movement and garnered attention to the struggles faced by women in Iran. Using artistic techniques and symbolism contributes to portraying feminist resistance and agency within the Iranian context. The representation of female figures in his work underscores the centrality of women's rights to the broader struggle for freedom, offering an accessible medium for raising awareness and fostering change. Additionally, understanding the digital platforms or online communities where Rahimi's work is shared can shed light on facilitating feminist placemaking through digital tools, creating virtual spaces for dialogue and solidarity (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Zartosht Rahimi, *For All the Martyrs of Freedom, on saving the world with art*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

Shahsavari and Ayeen's artwork stands as a potent critique of the Iranian government's actions, and it is instrumental in unveiling the emotional turmoil experienced by many Iranians. They employ evocative visual techniques in their gouache and watercolor artworks, capturing the complexities of the Iranian socio-political landscape and the emotional weight of living within it. Through their poignant pieces, they communicate not only personal emotions but also a collective sense of grief and frustration, thereby aligning their expressions with broader social narratives (see Figure 4).

Their use of hashtags, such as #MahsaAmini (in Persian, #مهسا_امینی), underscores their intent to extend their artworks' reach and provoke conversation around the specific case of Mahsa Amini, a young woman who tragically died. By highlighting this case, Shahsavari and Ayeen engage with a shared sense of loss within Iranian society and amplify the demand for justice and accountability. The use of digital platforms here functions not merely as a showcase of their work but also as an active space for dialogues on the government's treatment of its citizens.

While their art does not answer why the government easily attacks its society, it importantly foregrounds these questions in the public sphere, compelling viewers to confront these issues and initiate dialogues. The artworks transcend their aesthetic appeal to become active sites of protest and resistance, embodying many Iranians' emotional struggles.

Shahsavari and Ayeen's digital feminist placemaking practices, as seen in their use of online platforms and hashtags, emphasize the power of art in connecting individual stories to broader socio-political discourses.

Their work serves as an affirmation of the resilience of Iranians navigating an intricate socio-political terrain. It highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms in amplifying dissent and fostering a sense of solidarity among Iranian communities.



Figure 4. Abbas Shahsavari and Mayram Ayeen: *Why does the Iranian government easily attack its society? We who live in Iran do not know the answer to this question, It is clear to us that we are in an unfortunate situation.* Image courtesy of the artists.

Gender Justice: Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran, the artwork created by Karla D. Hernandez and Tahseen Reza Anika, effectively demonstrates the capacity of art to communicate complex socio-political narratives and to serve as an instrument for change. By creating a visually compelling depiction of their vision for a society that values women's rights and gender equality, the artists harness their creativity to contribute to the broader discourse on social justice in Iran (see Figure 5).

The virtual exhibition of this artwork at the Venice Biennale in 2023 through an augmented-reality-enabled installation broadened the potential audience for their message. The augmented reality technology imbued their work with immediacy and intimacy that would have been challenging to achieve in a traditional exhibition setting. This innovative approach to the exhibition attests to the effectiveness of digital tools in enhancing the reach of art. It provides an immersive experience that deepens viewers' engagement with the artwork's themes and messages.

Furthermore, this digital medium provides an opportunity to sidestep physical boundaries and censorship issues that could limit the artwork's reach, particularly for artists from regions with restrictive freedom of expression, such as Iran. This way, the digital platform became an enabling environment, amplifying the artists' voices and facilitating engagement with a global audience.

Therefore, this instance of the artwork's creation and exhibition showcases the potential of combining traditional artistic practices with digital tools to pursue feminist placemaking. It illustrates how the creative

utilization of digital platforms can provide a conduit for dialogue, reflection, and action on pressing social issues. As seen in the works of Hernandez and Anika, the fusion of art and technology can be a powerful strategy in the ongoing struggle for women's rights and gender equality. Further exploration of such intersectional approaches can provide valuable insights for future feminist placemaking endeavors.



Figure 5. Karla D. Hernandez and Tahseen Reza Anika, *Gender Justice: Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran, #MahsaAmini*. Image courtesy of the artists.

5. Discussions

The concept of digital practices comes to the fore as digital spaces serve as crucial platforms for activism when physical spaces are inaccessible or restricted, as exemplified by the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran. These digital platforms extend the scope of activism by facilitating communication, collective mobilization, and advocacy, mainly through social media platforms. In the face of physical assembly restrictions, digital spaces have become pivotal tools for raising global awareness, sharing experiences, and strategizing.

However, despite their critical role in mobilizing movements, digital activism's potential limitations and risks—such as surveillance, censorship, and misinformation—should not be underestimated. Feminist digital initiatives like My Stealthy Freedom, White Wednesdays, and The Girls of Revolution Street have deftly employed digital platforms to advocate for gender equality and women's rights. Nevertheless, their long-term impact remains an area for further exploration. The feminist digital art discussed here catalyzes social relations by fostering dialogue, contesting societal norms, and spotlighting individual experiences within a political context.

The artworks created by Iranian artists Arghavan Khosravi, Roshii Rouzbehani, Zartosht Rahimi, Abbas Shahsavari, and Maryam Ayeen underscore the crucial role of art in challenging societal norms and advancing social justice. Each artist uses their unique artistic language to question traditional gender roles, expose injustices, and advocate for societal change. Their works stand as powerful testaments to the struggle for gender equality and the emancipation of women in Iran.

With their distinct themes of exile, suppression, and empowerment, Khosravi's surrealist works provoke a critical examination of the societal structures that confine and oppress. Rouzbehani's creations, on the other hand, visually empower women and address pressing social issues, effectively utilizing the digital realm to disseminate her messages. Similarly, the works of Rahimi, Shahsavari, and Ayeen draw attention to the deep-seated problems in Iranian society, using their art to give voice to the voiceless and to demand change.

Gender Justice: Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran, an artwork by Karla D. Hernandez and Tahseen Reza Anika, skillfully depicts their vision of a society underpinned by gender equality. Exhibited at the 2023 Venice Biennale through an augmented-reality-enabled installation, their work uses digital tools to create immersive experiences that provoke dialogue around critical social issues.

Thus, the works of these artists, as presented in Figures 1–5, serve as a vivid illustration of the transformative power of digital art in promoting social justice. They not only reflect the challenges faced by individuals in Iran, but they also echo the global struggle for gender equality and women's rights.

6. Conclusions

Feminist art and protest in Iran challenge societal norms through symbolic resistance and the redefinition of spaces. Actions like removing hijabs during protests exemplify this resistance. These efforts, often occurring in digital spaces, form counter-narratives to dominant societal discourses and create arenas for marginalized voices. Despite this, cultural norms, repression, and resource scarcity present unique challenges.

Digital spaces provide platforms for activism, especially when physical spaces are inaccessible or restricted. They facilitate communication, mobilization, and advocacy, becoming essential for raising global awareness. Despite this, potential limitations, such as surveillance, censorship, and misinformation, highlight the need for caution in digital activism. Despite their initial success, the long-term impact of these initiatives remains an area for further exploration.

The emergent digital activism in the feminist movement in the MENA region, particularly in Iran, signifies a significant strategic shift against gender norms and discriminatory practices. Women creatively leverage online platforms to push back against patriarchal power structures under authoritarian regimes.

As discussed, one significant example is the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, which has galvanized a considerable following, demonstrating how digital spaces can promote women's rights and equality. This movement has been effective in challenging traditional gender norms and expectations, asserting autonomy over personal spaces, and pushing for legislative and societal change. It has brought individual narratives of resistance and empowerment to the fore, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on gender equality in Iran.

However, the reality of enduring conservative Islamic laws and societal norms, such as the compulsory hijab in Iran, underscores the challenges that remain. As such, while acknowledging the accomplishments of digital feminist movements like Woman, Life, Freedom, it is crucial to continue assessing their long-term influence on public opinion and policy changes concerning women's rights in Iran.

The impact of digital arts and online platforms on shaping discussions around gender equality and feminist activism, both within Iran and globally, is palpable. Still, further research is warranted to fully appreciate the depth of this influence, especially in terms of practical changes in policies and societal attitudes towards gender norms. The intersection of art, feminism, and digital activism presents rich opportunities for further scholarly exploration. It is poised to significantly contribute to the discourse on women's rights in the MENA region.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express deep gratitude to the students of the Community Design and Development Resources course at Huckabee College of Architecture, Texas Tech University, for their exceptional creativity during Spring 2023. Jessica Stuckemeyer's invaluable input in refining this article's English language is especially acknowledged. Additionally, I am thankful to the artists, activists, students, and fellow Iranians for their insights from interviews and focus groups that enriched this research. This article is based upon work from COST Action DOPMADE, CA18204, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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