

I.B. TAURIS

Sex, Family &
Culture in the
Middle East

edited by
Claudia Yaghoobi

THE #METOO MOVEMENT IN IRAN

Reporting Sexual
Violence and
Harassment

The #MeToo Movement in Iran

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For Jin, Jiyan, Azadi

For all the women and men who have been subjected to gender-based and/or sexual violence, sexual harassment, and rape

For Jina (Mahsa) Amini, Nika Shahkarami, Sarina Esmailzadeh, and many other women who fought and died for freedom

For Nika Shahkarami, a sixteen-year-old teenager who disappeared on September 20, 2022, during the protests in Iran following Jina Amini's death. Ten days later, the news of her death spread. Her death involved violence, torture, and possibly rape by the Islamic regime's security forces in detention

For Armita Abbasi, and all dissident women and men and queer people, who have been/are systemically being tortured and raped in Iran's prisons

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Note on Transliteration and Translation	x
Prologue: #MeToo Movement and Redefining the Private Sphere <i>Ziba Jalali Naini</i>	xi
Introduction: Bodies, Spaces, and Places <i>Claudia Yaghoobi</i>	1
1 Like a Wrapped Chocolate: The Islamic Republic's Politics of Hijab and the Normalization of Sexual Harassment <i>Esha Momeni</i>	11
2 The Iranian #MeToo and the Double Bind of Iranian Feminism: Between Religion, the Global Gender Struggle, and Liberal Feminism <i>Dilyana Mincheva and Niloofar Hooman</i>	23
3 Rhetorical Listening to the Iranian #MeToo Movement in Diaspora <i>Yalda N. Hamidi</i>	39
4 Structural and Material Considerations and the Nexus of Power and Sexuality in the Iranian #MeToo Movement <i>Mahdi Tourage</i>	53
5 Twitter Data Analysis on #MeTooIran <i>Yasamin Rezai and Mehdy Sedaghat Payam</i>	71
6 #Unveiling_the_Iranian_MeToo: Symptomatic Reading of Iranian MeToo through the Lens of Political Economy <i>Paria Rahimi</i>	89
7 Whose Voice Is Missing? MeToo Digital Storytelling on Instagram and the Politics of Inclusion <i>Golnar Gishnizjani</i>	107
8 Sexual Violence, MeToo, and Iranian Lesbians' Censored Voices <i>Mahdis Sadeghipouya</i>	123

9	The White-Collars' New Masculinities in #MeToo: How to Maintain Gendered Privileges? <i>Somayeh Rostampour</i>	135
10	<i>Hush! Girls Don't Scream</i> (2013) by Puran Derakhshandeh and the #MeToo Movement in Iran <i>Maryam Zehtabi</i>	149
	Afterword: Patriarchalism, Male Abuse, and the Sources of the #MeToo Movement in the Muslim Middle East <i>Roger Friedland, Janet Afary, and Charlotte Hoppen</i>	161
	Notes	205
	Bibliography	251
	List of Contributors	281
	Index	287

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book emerged out of my desire to support survivors of sexual assault and rape in the ways I could and with the capacities I had. When, in 2020, the courageous survivors came forward with their narratives of being subjected to such heinous sexual crimes, they were largely gaslit and their narratives invalidated by the accused who still dominated positions of power. To stand in solidarity with the survivors, I decided to invite contributors to write and document these narratives. Hence, I owe tremendous gratitude not only to the survivors for their courage in breaking their silence but also to all my colleagues in this volume, who, regardless of the taxing task of writing about sexual harassment and rape, welcomed my invitation. However, the work would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many colleagues and friends who in one way or another helped me. For that, I am indebted to them. I would also like to thank the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Institute for the Arts and Humanities Publication Support Grant, which allowed me to complete this book. Similarly, I offer my regards to the editorial board at IB Tauris, external reviewers, and administrative staff.

Note on Transliteration and Translation

For transliteration, we have tried to use the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system (IJMES) for Persian. However, common or established pronunciation has guided how certain names and terms appear in the manuscript. Similarly, for direct quotations, the original transliteration has been used. Hence, readers might note some inconsistency. All translations, summaries, and paraphrasing of the Persian primary and secondary sources are the authors' unless otherwise stated.

Prologue

#MeToo Movement and Redefining the Private Sphere

Ziba Jalali Naini

The social movement called “MeToo” is the embodiment of a public protest against one of the age-old historical violences, typically against women, but also against children and men. In fact, it represents the voice of the victims of sexual harassment and abuse. In Iran, however, this time women (some men and queer folks too) have broken their silences and publicly revealed the widespread taboos against sexual harassment, which happens to all age ranges, in all places, and in various situations. The phrase “MeToo” is in fact the simplified version of the sentence that refers to all victims of sexual abuse and indicates solidarity, namely that “it has happened to me too and you are not alone.” Despite the bravery in crossing the red lines of the strong traditional and cultural beliefs and their derivative clichés, sexual harassment narratives are extremely painful for the victims to recount, especially in terms of their psychological aspects. The victims take a significant step further by breaking their silence and recalling previous emotional trauma and pent-up anger, which could otherwise be interpreted or judged as complicity with the abuser. They break their silence while taking major steps toward identifying their shared pain in a larger society in order to act radically and fundamentally in addressing this issue. This in and of itself is regarded as a paradigm shift in Iranian women’s rights movement, because it distorts the rigid border between private and public spheres and its outcomes. It also challenges the specifications derived from gender segregation and the discriminations based on the separation of these two spheres and their special values. This also refers to the traditional dual space of life andarūnī (internal)/bīrūnī (external), which represents the measures of an ideological gender segregation to preserve the virginity of girls and the integrity of the lineage of the husband’s children. The best arrangement was for women to stay at home and in the private/secret space of the family.

Similar to most social movements, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of the #MeToo movement. However, the inception of the movement in the West, in terms of historical and social changes in women's rights movements, can be traced back to two historical moments in 2006 and 2017. In 2006, Tarana Burke's mother encouraged her to start a social initiative to defend the poor and improve the lives of girls who were/had been exposed to sexual violence. Burke, an African American working-class woman from New York, was the victim of sexual abuse and rape both as a kid and as a teenager. She began the initiative to relieve her personal anguish, and the local community eventually welcomed it. This is how the "MeToo" movement was born in the first place.¹ The second moment was in October 2017, eleven years after Burke's initiative, when the "MeToo" hashtag began trending on social media via the confessions of the Hollywood actress, singer, and songwriter Alyssa Milano, accusing Harvey Weinstein, the famous producer and giant in Hollywood cinema, of sexual abuse. Immediately after this, similar allegations were made against Weinstein by over a hundred women, leading to his expulsion from his "empire" and his eventual bankruptcy.²

Since then, voices like Milano's, who had suppressed their rage for years, have surfaced and have served as a rallying cry for other societal forces to join the chorus, condemning sexual assault especially in the workplace. Many victims have bravely and boldly responded to this call, and the movement has dominated the Western world. For instance, the #MeToo was viewed 4.7 million times and revealed numerous cases of sexual abuse on social media in less than twenty-four hours at one point. In addition, this movement was not limited to the United States—thousands of individuals from Canada and Europe also joined this massive social movement. After this social media initiative led to official complaints against celebrities and senior executives, many well-known social and political figures denounced sexual abuse perpetrators. The issue that arose after all this commotion was whether this movement against sexual assault would be a temporary one or would turn into a mass movement of activism that would eventually lead to social change.

In 2020, through feminist websites and digital media, a similar movement emerged in Iran. Unprecedentedly, well-known people in the realm of art and academia were accused of sexual assault by victims who came forward with their stories. Without a doubt, in a society such as Iran, where people's relationships are based on value concepts such as honor (*nāmūs*), zeal (*gheirat*), and innocence (*ismat*), narrators of sexual harassment may still be exposed to cases of honor killings and life threats and pay a high price and experience severe consequences for coming forward. This is incomparable to societies where such

taboos have already been broken. In Iran, victims of sexual harassment largely deal with the fundamental values of their families such as honor, chastity, and morality. Hence, most narrators began telling their stories of sexual assault using pseudonyms for both themselves and the perpetrators. In fact, it was social media users who identified the perpetrators based on the narrators' confessions and implicit indications. Some social media users expected the victims to reveal the perpetrators' names so that they could inspire the silenced victims to voice their experiences too.

In Iran, however, the movement was met with both support and criticism. The critics of the movement typically raise the question of the consequences of exposing rape—for them, the question is whether disclosing rape or sexual harassment will really stop the rapist, or is broadcasting their punishment in public a kind of propagating of improper behavior? On the other hand, the supporters of disclosing sexual harassment and the abusers' names argue that doing so is a sort of punishment for the abusers and a lesson for others, both in the private realm of family members and in the public sphere by their employers, bosses, and even academia.

Given these debates, exposing an inappropriate act, misconduct, or a sexual assault seems to be not only a correct and responsible thing to do but it also serves to restore the victim's human rights. As a result, a person who is aware of and committed to his rights should never remain silent in the face of such crimes. This responsibility however has cultural and legal consequences. In other words, in the absence of cultural and family awareness, as well as legal recourse, there is no appropriate response to the reactions following the disclosure of harassment. The victims are blamed for what has happened to them, which is often worse position than their initial silence. Given that victim blaming³ is part of the dominant Iranian culture, the majority of the victims prefer to keep their mental and physical trauma hidden. But disclosing the stories of sexual abuse may ultimately help to decrease the number of cases exposed to violence and aggression in the future.

At the same time, according to the responses on social media, even if the aggressor denies his actions and responsibility, his greatest asset, which is his social capital, is irreversibly ruined. The danger lies in the fact that some of these aggressors might end up being discharged and declared as innocent by the court (if the case goes to the court); however, no matter what, they can hardly regain their former social image and reputation. Hence, it is advisable to review and verify all details before exposing both parties' names. Otherwise, some might be falsely accused and demand to rehabilitate and recover their social

credibility. It must be acknowledged that breaking private and public boundaries requires the necessary cultural background and moral support to ensure that the community's security and credibility are not compromised.

Undoubtedly, in the MeToo movement, abusers and perpetrators are certainly reprimanded in the public and lose their social reputation. Therefore, there have been few critiques of the movement such as the "justice by the citizens," which refers to the fact that expelling the accused from the society prior to trial and proof of their guilt is one of the most dangerous approaches in these circumstances.⁴ Or, as Jessica Butcher, a successful entrepreneur known as one of the fifty women who inspired digital technology in Europe in 2016, put it: "Has today's feminism begun to offend itself?" In addition, Butcher also claimed that the "MeToo" movement is used to "reinforce a discourse that always identifies women as vulnerable." According to her, approaches of this movement "are not in the interest of equality campaigns [and that] the MeToo not only damaged women's self-esteem, but also overnight tarnished the image of many innocent men."⁵

From a legal standpoint, proving a crime, like other legal and criminal litigation, is the first step toward achieving the victim's rights within the framework of the Islamic penal code. In addition, the victims must prove their claim in some way, while being forced to respond to relatives and the public about the reasons for the violence. In sexual harassment reports, if the victims who shared their experiences of the violence do not prove the abusive behavior, they will be at risk of criminal accusations.

In Iran's Islamic penal code, rape and sexual assault do not have a precise legal definition, and most sexual crimes originate from adultery. In fact, the crime of "rape" is not recognized and what exists is known as "forced adultery." The border between adultery—in which the parties of the relationship are found guilty—and rape—in which only the woman is found guilty—is narrow, and if the perpetrator cannot be proven, the victim herself becomes a criminal. Both adultery and forced adultery are types of illicit relations and are proven in the same way, but it is difficult to prove them, and the unproven charge of adultery (*qazf*) itself is considered a crime, which is punishable by eighty lashes. The overlap between the two is one of the reasons why victims do not go to the judicial authorities because victims who appeal to the law potentially expose themselves to being accused. However, adultery has been criminalized, and in order to prove adultery, the three elements of confession, testimony, and knowledge of the judge are considered. Of course, the element of confession is excluded in the matter of rape. The witness element is also very rare or impossible. Therefore, the only reliable element remains the knowledge of the judge.

The judge's knowledge is first determined based on the initial report of the police, and forensic medicine, then the plaintiff's claim, the defendant's evidence in the crime investigation sessions, the relationship between the accused and accuser, testimony of witnesses, and sent messages by the accused. According to Article 102 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the investigation of crimes against chastity is prohibited unless the crime is visible or is accompanied by a complaint from a private plaintiff and the presentation of reasons. For this reason, victims of such crimes in many cases avoid filing complaints against the rapists; hence, the statistics of the reported crimes that the judicial authority compiles do not match with the actual number of the committed crimes.⁶ But changes were made in 2014 by amending laws such as Note 2 of Article 224 of the Islamic Penal Code, which adopted that "whenever a person commits adultery with a woman who is not willing to commit adultery, while she is unconscious, asleep or drunk, his behavior will be considered as rape. In adultery by deceiving and fooling an underage girl or by kidnapping, threatening or intimidating a woman, even if it causes her to surrender, the above sentence is also valid."⁷

In addition, in the bill of the "Preservation of Dignity and Protection of Women against Violence," the definition of the concept of violence is more comprehensive and closer to international definitions. "Violence" is defined as "any behavior, whether act or omission that is committed against a woman due to her gender or vulnerable position or type of relationship, and causes harm or damage physically, mentally or to her personality, dignity or restriction or deprivation of rights and her legal freedoms."⁸ Iranian government agencies accelerated the approval of this bill after the beginning of the wave of confessions under the "MeToo" movement, which may be an attempt to provide a proper and supportive situation for realization of the rights of the victims of sexual crimes. The role of NGOs and human rights organizations and the pursuit of independent lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists should not be overlooked in clarifying these social problems and providing up-to-date and comprehensive and practical legislation.

Globally, horrible acts of harassment and rape occur in various societies, and the victims of such violence keep their pain secret for a variety of reasons. As a result of processes such as preaching by relatives, or blaming victims of sexual harassment, normalizing and hiding sexual abuse, and a lack of community support, the victims largely suffer from depression, suicide tendency and attempts, reluctance to marry, and a variety of other physical and mental trauma. So, the question remains as to how harassment and rape can be publicly discussed and communicated in Iran and at what price? In the absence of specialized

legal groups that support and work on rape victims, is it necessary to raise it at all? If not, the rapist will go unpunished and would continue to harass other victims; when society, intellectuals, and even families have also been considered accomplices, what should be done? Such questions have provoked a variety of responses in both Iran and the West. The courage of the narrators and the taboo-breaking dimensions of Iranian women's movements in such circumstances are significant and incomparable to what has been done in the West. Academics such as Žižek have critiqued the "MeToo" movement and harassed narrators in the West saying: "They want power and the sad fact is that one of the ways to achieve power in social connections in many Western nations, particularly in the United States, is to seem to be a victim. And now, if someone comes forth to refute this claim of victimization, he'll be blamed of abusing the victim and other things."⁹ As mentioned earlier, any movement confronts numerous pressures and costs at its inception. But the movement's very positive achievements will be revealed and evaluated in the medium and long term. With the presence of proper penal laws in the society, suitable treatment system, along with family and supportive society, many traumas and injuries of rape will be compensated and treated for the victims of violence.

Women from the lowest classes of the society, from impoverished cultural and economic backgrounds, and those who frequently endure employment insecurity and lose their jobs are among the silent population of this movement. Even in Western societies, the lower classes of the society had limited role in this movement; however, to jump to conclusions about Iran's MeToo might be premature as the movement is still young and centered on well-known cultural and artistic figures and has not yet reached the lower socioeconomic classes. Actually, every thought and attitude should arise from a certain social stratum or class and local community. Depending on their authenticity, depth of social ties, and their common claims and demands, this attitude would develop among its members and soon spread to the whole society. Considering the movement as a class-based one is an ideological assumption that can only serve to undermine the movement. In addition, in Iran, any movement or protest that does not originate from within the society is often criticized as being superficial, imported, and temporary. However, we have to acknowledge that it is vital to rely on the widespread global transnational feminist movements. The potentials and the flaws, as well as the power, of every movement or protest may be also linked to that society's potentials and failures in embracing and understanding the problem and trying to reflect it to the responsible audience. The least impact such collective movements have is the reflection on the chronic and hidden

problems of the society and the consequent empowerment and awareness of individual rights.

According to a senior consultant with a prominent company in standard assessment in Canada, the “MeToo” movement has expanded the discourse about appropriate workplace behavior. He continues, “We used to think it was in men’s nature to act inappropriately, but now we know that this seemingly normal behavior is deemed a violation and has been condemned. This, in my opinion, is a wonderful thing.” According to Kenneth Fredeen, “The frequency of sexual harassment complaints in organizations has increased, and this change has made the voices of the victims heard. All organizations have been asked to address this problem radically through warnings and, if necessary, dismissals. This is a turning point. Let’s keep moving forward.”¹⁰

Sexual harassment is part of a broader category of violence against women that has been confined to the private sphere and secrecy. Domestic violence, spousal abuse, and marital violence are examples of intimate partner violence (IPV), which is becoming a global social and public health crisis. Unsurprisingly, there is no single universally accepted definition or a conceptual framework for IPV that encompasses the phenomenon’s complexity. Although some theoretical frameworks for studying IPV appear to have an advantage over others, their validity has yet to be verified. Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of IPV, a limited theoretical position may cloud our understanding of this phenomenon.¹¹ An example of IPV in Iran is stoning for adultery as one of the sharia rulings. According to Islamic tradition, “the testimony of four just persons who witnessed the crime with their own eyes” and “four times the confession of the accused apart from pressure and in a free atmosphere” are required to prove adultery.¹² Some academics such as Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani believe that “it comes out that the intention of Islam’s sharia is not to easily prove the committing of adultery.”¹³ Despite the fact that certain Shiite authorities believe stoning is practically “impossible and highly improbable,” the “judge’s knowledge” is now one of the ways to impose a stoning sentence in Iran’s Islamic penal code, which has been in effect since the 1979 Revolution. In recent years, several stoning judgments have been granted in Iran, according to human rights organizations, based on “judge’s knowledge” or “forced confessions.”¹⁴

As a result, in Iran, only in very rare cases a family will report a sexual assault of their daughter or the women of the family that happens within the family or elsewhere. For a better understanding of the dynamic between the private and the public, the following narrative illustrates an Iranian father’s mindset. This experience is about a person who had a sabbatical study in Canada with

his family, but he preferred to return earlier. His strange reason was that his ten-year-old daughter had gradually realized that she could get him arrested for mistreatment by dialing a simple police number, and that Canada was not like Iran, a country where he could easily punish his daughter severely. He might have told his daughter that this is her fate and that she had no right to complain! And he could punish her even more if she contacted the cops. That person returned to his paradise, where minor and major crimes/sins go unnoticed and its officials ignore the fact that even slight infractions can lead to grave crimes.¹⁵

The rise of the MeToo movement in Iran raised the question of whether Iran's existing legal framework and institutions are capable of dealing with such issues. What are the restrictive laws in Iranian society? What are the regulations for penalizing sexual harassment or the aggressor in society to avoid the occurrence and repetition of sexual assault? How are people reacting to this issue? What psychological, legal, and medical resources have been made available to women who have been abused in order to prevent the violence from continuing and to treat the injuries that have resulted from it? What are the criteria for distinguishing the private from the public sphere, as well as the requirements for each? Is it still the case in our legal system that the "private sphere" has contradictory meanings and rights in regard to old traditional beliefs and values?

One of the most influential impacts of the MeToo movement in Iran began last year with narratives in the field of art, journalism, and cinema, which started with an unprecedented series of controversial tweets. On March 23, 2022, an assistant director and programmer of Iranian cinema explained a series of events happening behind the scenes of a movie and claimed that she was subjected to harassment after several encounters between her and a famous actor by publishing twenty-two threads of tweets. This assistant director, whose narrative on Twitter was accompanied by widespread reactions, claimed that some of the film crew knew about this incident. This revelation was the beginning of the "IranMeToo" domino. Consequently, a group of women involved in cinema issued a statement protesting the violence against women in the field. After this statement, which had eight hundred signatures, a five-member women's committee including Haniye Tavasoli, Taraneh Alidoosti, Somayeh Mirshamsi, Ghazaleh Motamed, and Maral Jeyrani was formed by the majority vote in order to deal with sexual harassment and any violence in the film industry. Part of the statement reads:

In the narratives that have been published about the painful experiences of women in Iranian cinema, all kinds of harassment comprising under the

umbrella of sexual violence have come up; including insults with sexual and gendered words, blackmailing the victims by depriving them the right to work and or be paid, sexual assault by threatening the victim's job security, unwanted physical contact, insistence and coercion to sexual acts, and finally physical violence and rape.¹⁶

This was the first time that such an accusation was made publicly against one of the well-known figures of cinema in Iran, and a large number of women in cinema as well as the society sympathized with and supported it.

Following this, the Association of Planners and Assistant Directors was the first association that reacted to this disclosure and supported the assistant director. The association also expressed its regret for the humiliating and immoral encounters and the creation of mental insecurities and even threats and physical attacks behind the scenes of the Iranian film industry and announced that this is not the first time that such incidents have happened. The Iranian Cinema Actors Association took a similar approach and condemned any violence, insults, and unethical behavior toward the actresses and issued a statement.

In the first meeting of the Cinema Organization's Council of Directors held this year, Mohammad Khazaei paid attention to the statement made by Iranian women cinematographers regarding the creation of an independent committee with an absolute majority of women to deal with complaints against sexual violence and ordered for special investigation and attention. He formed the Council of Professional Ethics in Cinema. This example of mobilization within the civil society, in spite of all the difficulties and criticisms, confirms the awareness of the public toward women's rights. And this is only the beginning. This is a sign of new awareness, deep understanding, and sensitivity of society as well as professional organizations and institutions toward women's rights, which is only the first step on the path toward a gender equal society.

Introduction: Bodies, Spaces, and Places

Claudia Yaghoobi

The word “rape” stamped repeatedly across her fractured face, overlayed with fingerprints, legal documents, and what seems like a page from a religious scripture, Sonia Balassanian’s collage of the woman (the cover image of this volume) gazing at the onlooker haunts the viewers, inviting them to acknowledge the “unspeakable.” She is the voice of the many unheard, silenced, invisible. She is the mirror held up for society to see as she is gazing at society simultaneously. In short, she demands to be seen, acknowledged, and validated while also raising awareness. She is the reason for this volume to come to life.

While the “MeToo” movement and the fight against sexual violence began unofficially a long time ago, it rose to prominence in the United States in 2017 and continues to do so globally even to this day. Initially, it aimed at raising awareness about sexual violence and harassment by exposing abusers. The goal of the movement was to get rid of all forms of gender violence, change policies, give people resources, and provide access to healing.¹ The movement in the United States began as a grassroots campaign ten years before it took off on social media in 2017 when users were asked to post their stories of sexual harassment and rape with the hashtag #MeToo. Since then, it has penetrated not only national but also global consciousness as increasing number of elite and powerful men are being accused of and charged with sexual harassment.

The Iranian #MeToo campaign took off on social media in August 2020, proliferating stories of rape, sexual abuse, and harassment. However, the number of individuals who have spoken out against harassment is still minuscule. Because of the political considerations inside Iran, there have only been few forums where the systemic nature of these injustices has been analyzed. These injustices are further complicated by the class status, nationality, immigration status, sexuality, gender identity, and disability of the victims, issues that require much greater attention. Although Iran’s #MeToo is specific to the country, it has global as well as local significance. One area where Iran’s #MeToo distinguishes itself from its

American counterpart is its interlocutors, who are ordinary Iranian women (I use “women” because the majority of narratives have come from individuals identifying as such) sharing their experiences of sexual harassment and assault within the public sphere of digital media regardless of the country’s historical silencing of minoritized populations. Another outstanding difference is that the majority of men who have been accused so far are part of the progressive, educated, middle-class social strata, including artists, academics, and creative individuals with major social capital and status. These are men who claim to be feminists or advocates of women’s rights giving women (the victims/survivors) a sense of false safety while abusing them and exposing them to sexual violence.

While Iran’s MeToo has been a crucial form of resistance, to this date, no major work has considered how the Iranian MeToo movement might enrich our critical and pedagogical practices. Hence, this volume aims to begin a conversation about sexual assault and the voices that testify to it within academic discourses and activist spheres. Pioneering works on gender, sexuality, sexual harassment, and gendered violence that this volume benefits from, to name a few, include Zahra Tizro’s *Domestic Violence in Iran* (2012), K. S. Batmanghelichi’s *Revolutionary Bodies: Technologies of Gender, Sex, and Self in Contemporary Iran* (2020), Janet Afary’s *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (2009), Afsaneh Najmabadi’s *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards* (2005), Homa Hoodfar’s *The Women’s Movement in Iran* (1999), and Mahnaz Afkhami’s *Sisterhood Is Global* (1984).² However, research on the recent discourse around sexual harassment, rape, violence, and consent, among many other topics, and their impact on women, men, and nonbinary and queer individuals in contemporary Iran have been limited or exclusively within the journalistic domain. This edited volume fills that gap by bridging the existing historical, sociological, and ethnographic research with an analysis of the current discourse around sexual harassment and MeToo in the context of today’s religious, cultural, literary, social media, digital/globalized world. As the first book of its kind focusing on Iran’s MeToo, the volume stands in solidarity with the survivors and the work of activists and journalists that already exists.

Methodological Structure and Theoretical Approach

This volume focuses on the various methods that women, men, and nonbinary and queer individuals have used to bring about change within the context of Iranian feminism. The chapters not only contextualize this emergent movement within

the history of Iranian women's feminist activism but also investigate the ways that the new generation of Iranian activists and those who have been subject to sexual violence demand justice by raising their voices and organizing, campaigning, and demonstrating both on digital media and on the streets. By doing so, they subvert the discourse considering them as mere victims; they claim their agency in narrating their stories of fight, flight, and otherwise. Acknowledging and redefining the survivors' agency in "doing whatever ... [they] deemed necessary at the time to survive the attack, whether that entailed fighting back or submitting to the rapist," as feminist theorist Carine M. Mardorossian argues, this volume intends to view women's "passivity itself ... [as] a defense mechanism," showing the victims/survivors that they are more than "their traumatic experiences, that they had the capacity to act and organize even as they were dealing with the psychic effects of rape or domestic violence."³ Considering this agency in an intersectional context complicated by class status, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, and disability, the contributors also attend to both promises and dangers, advantages and shortfalls of the nascent MeToo within the realm of digital media and the more traditional forms of activism in Iran.

Much of the theoretical discourse in the volume focuses on the feminist intersectional discussions, theories about subverting hegemonic discourses and power structures, and feminist geography relevant to public versus private spaces when discussing the public/private sphere of activism, campaigning, digital media activism, and filmmaking. The volume's focus on digital media activism and its consideration of class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and disability matters, among others, make it stand out from other works done before and bring in nuanced perspectives.

One of the overarching arguments of the volume zooms in on the survivors' strategic mechanisms of raising awareness, voicing their experiences of harassment, demanding public acknowledgment for their place within public discourses historically denied to them, and fighting back against targeted violence and narratives aimed at excluding them from public spaces and conversations.⁴ Over the past four decades (and historically) in Iran, gender segregation and subordination of the female body (and voice) has been on the agenda of not only the state but also the male-centered Iranian society. However, this volume demonstrates that while the female body has been the target of such disciplining and subordination, and subjected to violence, sexual assault, and rape, often because it has appeared in "the wrong place" (hypervisible in the public), Iranian women (and other sexually minoritized individuals) have utilized the same discourse about "proper places/spaces" and shifted their activism and resistance

toward the paradoxical private/public sphere of the digital media protest, pushing back against the mainstream narratives and outing the perpetrators of sexual violence and rape on social media platforms.

Since sexual harassment and rape are forms of violence against bodies considered inferior such as women's bodies as well as racialized and sexualized bodies, it is important to discuss what "gender-based violence" signifies here. To examine violence in the sociocultural context of violent acts in order to interpret them holistically is also crucial to discussions of sexual violence. Defined by the United Nations as any act resulting in physical, psychological, emotional, or sexual harm to women, gender-based violence also includes verbal or economic abuse, sexual harassment, forced labor, child marriages, honor killings, and so many other forms of violence against women (and other minorities). Gender-based violence has been described as a tool for subordinating women and other gendered bodies, and with the juridical and social inequalities within societies, it will continue to serve as a legitimate form of domination not only for heterosexual men but also for states.⁵ Violent acts have also been considered as a mechanism for expressing feelings and/or establishing various forms of gendered, class, and racial differentiations.⁶

However, as scholar of social change Zahra Tizro demonstrates in their book *Domestic Violence in Iran: Women, Marriage and Islam*, while gender-based violence is a global issue, the way that it presents itself in various cultures, it is important to investigate the intertwinement of local factors and roots of it too. Tizro argues that gender-based violence "is not the result of unaccountable or pathological behaviour, but of a learned, conscious and calculated behaviour originating from a social system of deep-rooted inequality and patriarchy. Unequal power relationships affect some individuals in such a way that they are encouraged to exercise their power over others and to intimidate or control them."⁷ In the context of power dynamics and hierarchies, in many parts of the world, including in the Middle East, enforced sexuality within marriage is viewed as the husband's right and the wife's duty.⁸ However, outside marriage, rape, which is infused with patriarchal meanings, is considered an offense, albeit against other men rather than the female survivor. It is seen as an attack on the honor of other men.⁹ In addition, sexual harassment and rape are legitimated by the behavioral patterns of the victim—the public views the assault as a consequence of an inappropriate behavior or even form of dressing. As mentioned earlier, sexual violence has direct links with maintaining and exerting power and control over the victims. In most patriarchal societies, violence is utilized to reinforce societal hierarchy and order.

The subordination of the female body and other minoritized bodies (inferior bodies) has roots in patriarchal institutions and their practices, which privilege heterosexual men and male bodies. This privilege facilitates male exertion of power on these “inferior” bodies. For instance, in the context of marriage or heterosexual relationships, gendered servitude is an integral part of heterosexual social relations between men and women and often translates into physical and economic obligations and dependence for women.¹⁰ Hence, central to patriarchal power structures is the securing of heterosexual male domination over other bodies, and “the forms and functions of male sexuality, such as rape, sexual harassment, physical assaults and so on, in the social control of women [and other minoritized bodies], represent the male attitude towards women as inferior members of society.”¹¹ Now, this inferior body is required to remain within the space/place designated to it by patriarchal social order, transgression of which threatens male dominance and subverts heterosexual male-centered, hegemonic narratives about their place in society.

Bodies elicit questions about the space and place they occupy. Within patriarchal societies, women are identified with their body sphere while men have the privilege of disembodiment. In his concept called “hexis,” Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the social significance of bodies and their physical placing in space through bodily posture, gestures, facial expressions, and speaking voice. The relationship between the social world and its inscription on bodies includes the ways that individuals and groups present their bodies to others, moving or making space for their bodies.¹² Bourdieu argues that “one’s proper place” is clearly expressed through “the space one claims with one’s body in physical space, through a bearing and gestures that are self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted (‘presence’ or ‘insignificance’).”¹³ According to Bourdieu, men are entitled to occupy more of the available space than women so they are “present” in space while women are “insignificant.” Such arguments demonstrate the female body as a site for sociocultural, religious, and political inscriptions, understood as a sex object—an object of male desire in need of control. This however does not mean that women (nonbinary and queer individuals and other gendered and classed bodies) necessarily conform to the above expectations as they are able to disrupt and subvert the existing discourses.¹⁴ For instance, feminist geographers such as Linda McDowell challenge such essentialist assumptions about women’s “proper place” in society. As McDowell explains,

Assumptions about the correct place for embodied women are drawn on to justify and to challenge systems of patriarchal domination in which women are

excluded from particular spatial arenas and restricted to others. In this sense to “know their place” has a literal as well as a metaphorical meaning for women, and sexed embodiment is deeply intertwined with geographical location.¹⁵

Relationships in societies are interdependent on spaces via mechanisms such as sex segregation or even dress code. For example, in the context of veiling, veiled bodies, and city spaces in Turkey, feminist geographer Banu Gökariksel has also commented on the politics of dressing and spaces, and the resulting restrictions versus advantages they might have for different women. According to Gökariksel, mobility within public spaces results in the shaping of identities in relation to power: “through their mobility subjects are formed both by and in relation to power.”¹⁶

Similarly in Iran, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, women’s and other minoritized bodies’ presence in public places—considered “improper”—have gradually become more visible, which has created a serious concern for the state and the male-dominated society. According to Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, “With their increasing presence in universities, various governmental administrations, public and private organizations, and NGOs, women gradually became active agents of social change, generating important challenges regarding the status and rights of women under Islamic law in the private (family) and the public spheres.”¹⁷ Amir-Ebrahimi views the spread of global culture via technology and the internet as some of the main reasons for this type of visibility within public spheres and the demand for justice and equal rights in public and private spaces. Examining one of the first online blogging platforms of Iran, she argues that Iranian women began “breaking the silence about their lives, conditions, frustrations, and desires ... [and started talking] openly about political, social, and cultural issues, but also about their personal lives, opinions, feelings, and aspirations for the first time ... The ‘freedom’ of expression in this new virtual world had a tremendous impact on women and young bloggers.”¹⁸

While the relationship between mobility of the subjects and power structures have historically influenced Iranian women’s rights activism, in contemporary Iran, the digital media and the internet have morphed into the spaces that bring the traditional activism and the digital one together, merging the local with the global. Because digital media exists simultaneously at the local, national, and global levels, survivors of sexual harassment and rape have been able to disseminate their narratives marked by dissent hashtags such as the #MeToo. Using social media platforms and the hashtag #MeToo, survivors and activists have begun fighting against such gender, sexual, and class-based violence by

building a platform based on solidarity and abolishing all forms of oppression and discrimination.

Chapter Breakdown

The volume includes a prologue, this introduction, ten chapters, and an afterword. Contextualizing the historical framework of Iranian MeToo activism within the larger Iranian feminist movements as well as the historical background within the context of Middle East, the contributors address how the privileged position of men who have been outed as rapists helps them to aggregate social, political, sexual, and economic capital through various networking to delegitimize the narratives of the survivors and, in fact, use their testimonies to their benefit. While Iran's #MeToo challenges the political economy of a capitalist society that re-produces systems of oppression such as sexual assault, one way this privileged position is considered is Iran's class-based system within the power hierarchies that allow men from the upper class of society to exploit those from more oppressed social groups. Within this complex web of power and privilege, the question of consent is significant. After discussion of the various confluences of positions of power and privilege in silencing the voices of the survivors to the assaulters' benefit in accumulating socioeconomic, sexual, and political capital, the volume also covers the intersections of various systems of oppression specifically highlighting marginalized voices such as the experiences of lesbian and the lesbophobe attacks within the online digital world. In these chapters, the contributors highlight the power dynamics within digital feminist networks in Iran with its unique attributes due to political, social, and religious structures. Many of these feminist networks have been selective in their support of the survivors, which also speaks to the intersection of class and power leading to inclusion of some and exclusion of others from the feminist discourses and support. The volume ends with a chapter focusing on cultural productions, specifically cinematic works, through which some filmmakers have challenged normalizations of sexual harassment by offering alternative discourses that have arguably paved the way for #MeTooIran.

Ziba Jalali Naini's prologue, "#MeToo Movement and Redefining the Private Sphere," addresses the foundational concepts in understanding Iran's MeToo, its manipulations and misconstruing, the social, cultural, and legal discourses around MeToo in Iran, and the support as well as the criticism that the campaign has faced.

In Chapter 1, “Like a Wrapped Chocolate: The Islamic Republic’s Politics of Hijab and the Normalization of Sexual Harassment,” Esha Momeni investigates how the enforcement of hijab has contributed to the objectification of the female body as an element of hostile Iranian masculinity in postrevolutionary Iran. According to Momeni, the compulsory nature of this hijab enforcement by the state shifted the discourse away from piety and religious practice toward the male libido. Hijab became a tool shielding men from sexual temptation and blaming women for male sexual violence. Momeni argues that this shift has condoned male sexual aggression, establishing hostile masculinity and violence against women.

Focusing on the digital world of social media such as Twitter as well as Iranian news media, and legal discourses surrounding testimonies of survivors of sexual assault and the various reactionary waves to these narratives, in Chapter 2, “The Iranian #MeToo and the Double Bind of Iranian Feminism: Between Religion, the Global Gender Struggle, and Liberal Feminism,” Dilyana Mincheva and Niloofar Hooman provide a nuanced account of the Iranian iteration of the #MeToo movement through close readings of publicly available Twitter testimonies of ordinary Iranian women and mediated reactions to these testimonies provided by clerics, feminists, and Iranian intellectuals, both domestic and diasporic.

Chapter 3, “Rhetorical Listening to Iranian #MeToo Movement in Diaspora, problematizes the reluctance of academic scholars in taking up research on the topic and encourages further study. In this chapter, Yalda N. Hamidi charts out the reasons for why gendered violence has become less than a favorite subject of study for Iranian academic feminists in the diaspora and proposes a methodological intervention for rapprochement and invites Iranian academic and transnational feminists to utilize some of their intellectual privileges to raise the voice of the Iranian #MeToo movement.

Highlighting the intersection of power and privilege in silencing the voices of the survivors of sexual harassment, Mahdi Tourage, in Chapter 4, “Structural and Material Considerations and the Nexus of Power and Sexuality in the Iranian #MeToo Movement,” provides us with debates on the concept of consent. While it is generally acknowledged that mutual consent, preferably spelled out in a contract, is the best possible basis for material and ethical relations of exchange between humans, especially regarding coitus, this chapter questions its feasibility.

Yasamin Rezai and Mehdy Sedaghat Payam in Chapter 5, titled, “Twitter Data Analysis on #MeTooIran,” examine the implications of the #MeToo movement on social media. In this social movement, native to the digital world and social media platforms, social media users publicize allegations of

sex crimes, mostly toward people who benefit from certain social, class, racial, gender, or political power in relation to others, who mostly are identified to be on the marginalized side of power dynamics.

In Chapter 6, “#Unveiling_the_Iranian_MeToo: Symptomatic Reading of Iranian MeToo through the Lens of Political Economy,” Paria Rahimi shows how the narratives of the MeToo movement can critique and challenge the political economy—the particular mode of production of the capitalist society that engenders different forms of oppression, including sexual assault.

In Chapter 7 “Whose Voice Is Missing? MeToo Digital Storytelling on Instagram and the Politics of Inclusion,” Golnar Gishnizjani asks important questions such as “does everyone have an equal right and opportunity to participate in feminist online campaigns, particularly the #MeToo hashtag?” In doing so, this chapter examines the intersectional struggles of the #MeToo hashtag in Iran.

Mahdis Sadeghipouya in Chapter 8, “Sexual Violence, MeToo, and Iranian Lesbians’ Censored Voices,” turns our attention to the minority groups who have been excluded from the movement. This includes lesbians, who as both women and lesbians endure different experiences of sexual violence that sometimes target their sex, sometimes their sexuality, and sometimes both at the same time.

Somayeh Rostampour, in Chapter 9, “The White-Collars’ New Masculinities in #MeToo: How to Maintain Gendered Privileges?,” problematizes the questions regarding class and social status within the movement. While the #MeToo movement in Iran has remained limited largely to middle-class women, it has been able to challenge the “impunity of men” and implement some degree of “gender justice” in social media.

In Chapter 10, “*Hush! Girls Don’t Scream* (2013) by Puran Derakhshandeh and the #MeToo Movement in Iran,” Maryam Zehtabi considers the act of writing about one’s private life as a statement of rebellion in a context that forcefully stifles any expressions of the self in individuals. Normalizing the act of speaking openly about sexual assault, however, did not start with the #MeToo movement. Zehtabi discusses how *Hush! Girls Don’t Scream* by Puran Derakhshandeh paved the way for the outpouring of support for the #MeToo movement in Iran.

Roger Friedland, Janet Afary, and Charlotte Hoppen’s afterword, titled “Patriarchalism, Male Abuse, and the Sources of the #MeToo Movement in the Muslim Middle East,” is based on a survey the authors conducted in 2018, just after the #MeToo movement was bursting onto the scene in the Middle East. They surveyed tens of thousands of younger adults in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Tunisia, and Turkey about their experiences with molestation and

sexual violence using Facebook banner ads. Analyzing the survey data, the afterword offers significant information about the kinds of men who are most likely to engage in public molestation and domestic violence.

The Limitations of This Volume

The varied interests and expertise of the authors of this volume contribute to a better understanding of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and rape in contemporary Iranian society; however, no single volume can address all the possible issues on any topic, let alone topics as complex and interconnected as these. Most victims and survivors remain anonymous, and many have yet to come forward. While the number of scholars with the necessary skills in the study of gender and sexuality has increased over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the available sources and tools for addressing sexual assault and rape are minimal due to sexual harassment and rape being a taboo-laden topic within Iranian culture. The chapters in this volume have attempted to provide insights into significant issues related to the broad and complex topics of rape, sexual harassment, sexual violence, among many others. In addressing key issues, some questions are answered while others are yet to be explored.

One question that has gotten significant attention in recent years is that of gender-based violence, particularly toward women. However, narratives about such violence targeted at the nonbinary and queer folks and men have largely been missing from the public domain. The chapters in this volume also focus primarily on women survivors with a few chapters focusing on lesbian individuals and class-based violence, leaving violence toward other minoritized communities largely unexplored. It is our hope that this volume will be the beginning of many discussions around the topic, which will also address the ones the current volume fails to cover.

Like a Wrapped Chocolate: The Islamic Republic's Politics of Hijab and the Normalization of Sexual Harassment

Esha Momeni

In the summer of 2020, the hashtag #MeToo became a trend on Iranian social media platforms. Many women came forward to share their stories of sexual harassment and assault with the public. However, because Iran lacked adequate social, legal, and political structures to aid the victims and defend their rights, this historic global movement hardly went beyond a campaign to raise awareness. Two weeks into the start of the campaign in early August 2020, journalist Neda Sanij captured the social and political implications of this moment in the following lines:

Women's experiences of sexual harassment and rape [that became public with the #MeToo movement] startled many for several reasons: the high number of victims, their bravery in coming forward and telling their stories, victim blaming, and victim's feelings of vulnerability in the absence of a judicial system that could properly examine their stories and safeguard their citizenship rights.¹

A year later, on a summer day in 2021, I attended a clubhouse meeting on the topic of women and the issue of sexual harassment in Tehran's public spaces. The organizers were proposing the removal of the billboards and advertisements that obscured the pedestrian bridges and created danger zones. The flow of the conversation came to a halt when the topic of hijab was brought up. A few men insisted that women's hijab was the key to their safety in public whereas women claimed that wearing their complete Islamic hijab did not protect them from harassment. The inability of the male participants to accept women's reality has been conditioned by the Islamic Republic's hijab advertisement that has constantly promised that hijab would bring security to women and girls. In fact,