

Cycling as Resistance: Women living under Islamic Authoritarian-ism

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Abstract

The regulation of women's bodies under the Iranian and Saudi Arabian regimes has been the subject of much research. However, the majority of this research has focused on restrictions on women's clothing, access to the public sphere, and/or sport. This paper builds on these theories and suggests that the act of women cycling embodies resistance to the projection of the authoritarian regime's power onto women's bodies. Further, it argues that in rejecting the Iranian and Saudi Arabian regimes' restrictions on mobility, women who cycle can participate in the reconstruction of gender from below.

In recent years, cycling has emerged as a solution to a diverse set of problems in cities and states around the world, namely, congestion, heart disease, obesity and environmental issues. Cycling as a sustainable transport option, as well as one that contributes to public health, has become even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which public transport has become a potential site of infection. However, there is a significant gender cycling gap, one which is especially noticeable in Muslim-majority cities. Lack of safe cycling infrastructure has been shown to reduce the levels of women cyclists, and there is no doubt that this, as well as concerns related to climate and air pollution, contributes to these low figures.¹ There have also been suggestions, however, that cultural barriers play a significant role in reducing numbers of women who cycle. This essay will focus on the Saudi Arabian and Iranian contexts for a variety of reasons. First, both countries rely on (certain interpretations of) Islam to justify and legitimize their rule. They also attract significant international attention for their legally instituted restrictions on women's movements and freedoms, laws which attempt to invoke Islamic principles as their justification. These laws serve to regulate people's appearance in public, outlining how one ought to behave, with specific reference to their gender.² It is also interesting to note that both states have been categorised as rentier states:

¹ Lily Song, Mariel Kirschen, and John Taylor, "Women on Wheels: Gender and cycling in Solo, Indonesia", *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 40(2019): 141.

² It is important to note here that while the legal systems in Iran and Saudi Arabia uphold the construction of a gender binary, gender-affirmation surgery is legal in Iran, but problematic in its own right. See Zara Saeidzadah, "Understanding Socio-Legal Complexities of Sex Change in Postrevolutionary Iran", *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 80-102.

for whom a significant proportion of their income comes from oil extraction rather than tax revenue (though this is more the case for Saudi Arabia than Iran).³ Although beyond the scope of this essay, it might be considered that legal restrictions placed on women cycling could be linked to the authority's suspicion of environmentalism, that could be seen as a threat to the continued existence of the regimes. Only by understanding the motives of these two governments in restricting women's movement in public, especially on bicycles, can we understand exactly how this act embodies resistance to the respective authoritarianism-s.

In 2013, the Saudi Arabian government's religious authority ruled that women were allowed to cycle under certain conditions: while wearing Islamic full-body coverings, being accompanied by a male relative, and most interestingly, that this cycling is solely for recreational purposes.⁴ It is particularly worthwhile to consider this phrase in comparison to the legalisation of women driving in Saudi Arabia. Though the (former) ban on women driving and the current restrictions on women cycling represent the same authoritarian urge to control the mobility of women, and these activities are categorised, therefore, as 'transgressive',⁵ women may now drive unaccompanied, and can obtain a driver's license without their guardians permission.⁶ However, the fact that women cyclists must still be accompanied illustrates that cycling transgresses the State's construction of femininity to a greater extent than driving. This is likely due to the fact that the car may commonly be considered an extension of the private sphere, whereas the bicycle is unequivocally public.

Women have never been legally prevented from driving in Iran, but there seems to be a lack of clarity regarding the legality of women's cycling. Grand Ayatollah Khamenei (the Supreme Leader of Iran) has been quoted by those who support women cycling as saying that 'Cycling neither contravenes the law or the Sharia'.⁷ However, it has also been reported that his office issued a *fatwa*⁸ in September 2016 restricting women cyclists to

3 A.T. Kuru, "Authoritarianism and Democracy in Muslim Countries: Rentier States and Regional Diffusion", *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 3 (2014): 412.

4 Nabila Ramdani, "Saudi women are allowed to cycle - but only around in circles". *The Guardian*, April 3, 2013. Kristene Quan, "Saudi Women Can Now Ride Bicycles in Public (Kind of)". *Time*, April 3, 2013,

5 Deborah L. Wheeler, "Saudi Women Driving Change? Re-branding, Resistance, and the Kingdom of Change", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 11, no. 1 (2020), 97.

6 Martin Chulov, "Saudi Arabia to allow women to obtain driving licences", *The Guardian*, September 26, 2017.

7 Zamaneh Media, "Iranian Women's Cycling Barred by Law or Sharia?". *Zamaneh Media*, September 8, 2016.

women-only parks and stadiums.⁹ This was reportedly justified by claiming that women on bicycles in public would attract male attention, thus threatening their chastity and corrupting society.¹⁰ Although the *fatwa* does not seem to have been translated into a statute, it has been used by certain prosecutors and local police forces. Women have been prevented from accessing the city bike-sharing scheme in cycling-friendly Isfahan on these grounds.¹¹ What is especially notable is that in smaller cities, in which local officials ran campaigns to encourage cycling in order to reduce congestion and air pollution, some women cyclists were arrested by local police and only released after pledging not to cycle again.¹² This underlines a core hypocrisy in the policing of women's cycling in the Iranian context: women will suffer equally (if not more) the consequences of congestion and air pollution, but are given little recourse to action. It's also somewhat ironic to note that traffic enforcement in Iran more broadly speaking is considered wholly inadequate (Iran has one of the highest levels of road traffic deaths in the world).¹³ In policing women's cycling, the authorities illustrate just how subversive they understand this act to be.

Legal and religious authorities are not the only barriers that women who cycle in public face in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Women cyclists face resistance from their families and wider society as well as the religious authorities—captured in the critically-acclaimed, female-directed, Iranian and Saudi Arabian films Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* and Haifaa al-Mansour's *Wadjda*. Al-Mansour's film follows the young protagonist Wadjda's efforts to acquire a bicycle from the shop down the road, so that she can race her friend. What is compelling here is that initially it is women who deny her the bicycle: her mother claiming that she would not be able to have children if she rode a bicycle, and her head teacher Ms Hussa, who says: 'You know a bike isn't a toy for girls. Especially not for well-behaved, devout girls who protect their safety and their honor'.¹⁴ Similarly, Ahoo, one of the three protagonists in Mesh-

8 defined by the 6th Edition of the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia as "an opinion made by a judicial/religious scholar (a mufti) on a legal or religious matter. The fatwa is usually a valuable source of information on any subject for private individuals or for judges or other authorities, and it is normally used as a guide and does not have the force of law. Under normal circumstances, a fatwa is legally binding only in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance...". March 2021:1.

9 Aljani Ershad, "Iranian women defy Supreme Leader's biking ban". *France 25: The Observers*, September 21, 2016.

10 Tom Coghlan, "Women defy fatwa on riding bicycles". *The Times*, September 22, 2016.

11 Somayeh Malekian, "Bright orange bikes help women break barriers in Iran". *ABC News*.

12 Guardian Cities Staff, "They said girls don't ride bikes': Iranian women defy the cycling fatwa". *The Guardian*, June 12, 2017.

13 Rena Banakar and Shahra Nasrolahi Fard, "Driving Dangerously: Law, Culture and Driving Habits in Iran", *British Journal of*

14 *Wadjda*, directed by Haifaa al-Mansour (2012; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2014), Netflix.

kini's film, is ordered off her bicycle by her husband and later by her clansmen, as well as by the cleric brought by her husband to grant a divorce.¹⁵ Though it is indeed the cleric who refers to the bicycle as the 'devil's mount'¹⁶ there is no doubt that the rest of the men in Aho's life view a woman cycling as dishonourable. What unites the two films is their use of the bicycle as a symbol for freedom—a kind of freedom that comes with a certain level of sacrifice. Wadjda's mother eventually gives in to Wadjda and buys her the bicycle after she won the Quranic competition. However, it is clear that in doing so, she has prioritised her daughter's happiness over the fate of her marriage and has perhaps drawn some ridicule upon herself. Aho, it seems, has given up her family altogether in her refusal to dismount her bicycle. Nonetheless, Wadjda, her mother and Aho are all liberated from certain elements of society that had previously constrained them. The understanding that Al-Mansour and Meshkini have of the liberating role of the bicycle for women might explain the ferocity with which conservative elements of Iranian and Saudi Arabian society oppose women cycling.

Why is it that cycling is considered to transgress gendered roles more defiantly than economic and educational independence, access to which might challenge the hierarchies within family structures? This question is answered in acknowledging that women's behaviour in the public space is subject to much debate and restriction by religious authorities in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and that women's bodies have been seen as sites of political struggle within authoritarian regimes.¹⁷ Similar to constraints placed in both countries on women's dress, restrictions on women cycling may arise from the belief among conservative elements of the respective societies that women's visibility in the public space is shameful. Women's bodies are seen both as a site of shame (which should be covered in front of God and in front of non-*mahram* men) and a source of chaos—a threat to social order'.¹⁸ But the resistance of women living in these two states show that they can also use their own bod-

¹⁵ this form of divorce (*talaq*) consists of the "universal repudiation of a wife by her husband", see Judith E. Tucker, "Women and man as divorced: asserting rights", *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86.

¹⁶ *The Day I Became a Woman*, directed by Marzieh Meshkini (2000; Chicago, IL: Olive Films, 2010), Vimeo.

¹⁷ see, for example, Suzanne Brenner, "Private Moralities in the Public Sphere: Democratization, Islam, and Gender in Indonesia", *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 3 (2011): 479.

¹⁸ Ziba Mir Hosseini, "Criminalising Sexuality: Zina Laws as Violence Against Women in Muslim Contexts", *SUR* 15(2011), 18.

ies as a medium through which they can communicate their opposition not only to the strict gender segregation under which they live, but also to the very existence of the regimes, and the economic and social factors which support them.¹⁹

Asef Bayat's 'prophetic' book,²⁰ *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* explored the role that 'social nonmovements' play in resisting and reforming authoritarian states. This 'non-organized' form of resistance takes activities that are typically considered as non-political or even 'frivolous' and transforms them into modes of subverting and seizing political power in order to promote social change. Bayat argues that since patriarchy is mobilised by Middle Eastern authoritarian States (both secular and religious) to facilitate social control, and since the traditional forms of opposition (i.e. protest marches, opposition political parties and certain forms of media) find themselves stifled by the state, these 'social non-movements' are actually the most effective in instigating social change.²¹ This is despite the fact that these movements may not be ideologically driven and may lack leadership structures of traditional political organising.

In this way, Bayat provides an insight that is relevant to the resistance of Iranian and Saudi Arabian women to the patriarchal laws and norms that govern their bodies' appearance in the public space. Rather than focusing on changing the discriminatory laws through traditional channels, women resist through defying. Whether it is driving a car in pre-2017 Saudi Arabia, removing one's veil in public, or cycling in public, women and their allies are seizing their rights from the government rather than demanding them.²² For these women, the politics of practice is more effective than the politics of protest.²³ It is also worth noting that these movements are often not fringe movements (i.e. movements carried out by politicised people on the margins of society); they can be part of the everyday lives of millions of people.²⁴ In jogging, cycling, driving, taking public transport, playing sports etc., women mobilise through the *power of presence*—the simple refusal to be forced out of the public sphere,

¹⁹ Homa Hoodfar, 208–213, 229.

²⁰ The book consists of a series of essays and fieldwork articles that had been written/published between 2001 and 2009; and was published in 2010, a few months before the beginning of the Arab Spring.

²¹ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 16–17.

²² Homa Hoodfar, "Kicking back: the sports arena and sexual politics in Iran", in *Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restrictions and Resistance*, edited by Anissa Hélie and Homa Hoodfar, (London: Zed Books, 2012), 208.

²³ Bayat, 18–19.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

which in turn rejects the framing of their bodies by the religious and state authorities as ‘both obscene and erotic’.²⁵ Further, these activities represent ‘fun-ness,’ which as Bayat notes, has become a site for political contest.²⁶ In enjoying themselves, especially through means not controlled by the state or religious authorities, people can express their individuality in opposition to the repressive state. These ‘social non-movements’ take place predominantly on the street, which Bayat deems the ‘chief locus of politics for ordinary people’²⁷ meaning that those who would face structural barriers to inclusion even in ‘traditional’²⁸ feminist organising—working-class women, ethnic minority women, LGBTQI+ people, etc.—can partake in these movements.

A final aspect to be addressed in relation to restrictions on and resistance of women cycling in Saudi Arabia and Iran lies in the relationship between gender and mobility. Susan Hanson, in her 2010 article ‘Gender and mobility: new approaches for informing sustainability’ argues that while much attention has been given to how gender shapes one’s mobility (i.e., being (read as) a woman may limit one’s freedom of movement), there is a failure to recognise that the relationship between gender and mobility is in fact a symbiotic one. While gender affects and constructs certain meanings of mobility, so too does mobility construct the social and spatial meanings of gender.²⁹ Societies and states who attempt to conserve and/or promote traditional gender roles tend to use mobility in their gender constructions: a key constructed difference between men and women in such societies is their freedom of movement and their access to public spaces and services.³⁰ Additionally, one’s movement and their ability to control it, serves to both reflect and reinforce power relations in society; where women’s mobility is more limited, they are less likely to have any proximity to power.³¹ This mobility is not only important in granting women the freedom to move, it also gives them access to spaces where they may be able to express themselves more freely, as discussed in Nazgol Bagheri’s ethnographical work on the Tehran subway, in

²⁵ Hoodfar, 208., and Bayat, 98.

²⁶ Bayat, 18.

²⁷ Ibid 211.

²⁸ Bayat interestingly suggests that conceiving of political organising as the optimum form of feminist activism is a very Western approach. See *ibid*.

²⁹ Susan Hanson, “Gender and mobility: new approaches for informing sustainability”, *Gender, Place & Culture* 17, no 1(2010), 6-9;

³⁰ Hanson, 10.

³¹ *Ibid*, 14.

which riding in the women’s carriage is shown to have enabled certain women to access places where they felt comfortable to challenge the dress-code mandated by their household / community.³²

In using the bicycle as a means to commute in order to access employment or education, attend social events or simply for enjoyment, women in Saudi Arabia and Iran are therefore contributing to a reconstruction of gender from below. Their defiance of the immobility mandated by the religious and state authorities for women may mean that these authorities and those who align with them consider them to be lesser as women. Nonetheless, in being visibly mobile, especially in larger numbers, women do and indeed have reconstructed expectations of where, when and how a woman should travel in Iran and Saudi Arabia – whether it is through taking (either the women-only or mixed carriages of) public transport (e.g. the subway in Tehran), cycling, walking, or driving. Moreover, whether or not they adhere fully to the state’s dress requirements, they may also contribute to a new form of acceptable clothing for women exercising in public. It can thus be seen that through asserting their place on the street, their right to fun and enjoyment, and in defying laws, norms and expectations of women in their respective societies, women who cycle—or those like Meshkini and Al-Mansour who represent women cycling in their artistic or media productions—redefine their womanhood in defiance of the hostility and obstacles they face. Though women (and the majority of ordinary people) living in both societies remain disempowered from the political process, their power in their everyday lives should lie at the heart of any analysis of women’s resistance and activism in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In studying the way in which women in Saudi Arabia and Iran are prohibited, or limited, in their use of the bicycle by both the State and society, it becomes apparent how religion may be mobilised to limit women’s freedom of movement. As has been mentioned throughout this essay, there is no definitive ruling in Islam on the

³² Bagheri, 314.

issue of women on bicycles, which in many ways has facilitated its weaponization by the authoritarian Saudi Arabian and Iranian regimes. Nonetheless, cultural productions such as the two films discussed above capture societal attitudes towards the morality of women cycling, while at the same time, attempting to use the bicycle to symbolise liberation and emancipation. The entrenchment of conservative attitudes towards women's mobility, especially in terms of sports and exercise that are undertaken in the public sphere, is one that could not be easily overcome through typical modes of resistance, even if they were available to dissidents in these contexts. However, in moving beyond traditional ideas of resistance to authoritarianism, one can begin to perceive the power of the every-day resistance—the manner in which the common person (or woman) employs a combination of a *politics of practice* (i.e. cycling) and a *politics of presence* (in public) in order to not only defy the regime, but to indeed contribute to social change from below. This change translates to a redefinition of what is and is not acceptable for a woman to do, and where she may and may not go. A woman's power in this context must not be overlooked, so that the role that the everyday, so-called 'de-politicised' woman plays in redefining gender constructions from the ground up to be recognised.



Section of Mitra Tabrizian, *Surveillance*, 1989 | Monochrome Digital Print 51 x 152 cm
Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery © The British Museum