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The Current Situation, Challenges, and Countermeasures of Women's Dressing Freedom: A Case Study of Iran

Yingdi Liu

Yinchuan No.1 High School, Yinchuan, China
mrcrow0920@outlook.com

Abstract. The hijab has a long and complex history in Iran, particularly as a symbol of political and social control. In recent years, growing numbers of Iranian women have protested the compulsory hijab law as part of their broader struggle for freedom and human rights. These protests have become increasingly common despite facing severe repression from the Iranian government, which has inflicted harm on women and their families. This paper aims to examine the current state of Iranian women's freedom of dress and the key challenges they face. It draws on case studies and relevant literature to analyze the roots of these challenges, which stem from individual, societal, and institutional levels. The study finds that promoting dress freedom requires a combination of individual education, collective feminist advocacy, and institutional reform. Specifically, Iranian feminist organizations should continue to push for gender equality, while the state should establish legal oversight mechanisms to safeguard women's rights. Moreover, the paper also offers practical recommendations for those seeking to support change for Iranian women.

Keywords: Women's Dressing Freedom, Iranian Feminist Movement, Institutional and Social Challenges

1. Introduction

Hijab is a symbol of Islam. Islamic women need to be modest, which means they cannot show off in public places. In this case, Islamic women cover their bodies with a hijab. It should be a choice of religion, but it has now become a tool that controls women's bodies in Iran. Hijab became the mandatory dress code for all Iranian women after the 1979 Iranian revolution by the order of Ayatollah Khomeini. He also set up morality police to supervise women's dress, and they can punish women who breach the law. Many morality police will use violence against women. In this case, many feminist organizations in Iran tried many times to protest the hijab law, but there were no substantive changes in Iranian society.

Hijab is a historical issue in Iran. Iranian people's attitude towards hijab has changed many times. More and more people now realize that hijab is just a choice of religion, and forcing violence on this issue will bring physical trauma [1]. Jisoo also defines the difference between the different veils. Moreover, women's contribution to the Iranian economy is important, but the hijab law will significantly limit women's economic performance [2]. The law and hijab bring Iranian women economic vulnerability because women are more easily losing jobs than men in Iran [2]. Based on

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this, the paper analyses cases of women's dressing freedom in Iran to display the current situation in Iran, illustrating the main challenges to women's dress and suggesting solutions about how to support the feminist movement in Iran.

2. The current situation of women's dressing freedom in Iran

2.1. The definition of dressing freedom

Freedom can be divided into psychological and physical freedom. Freedom is to do things that exhibit self-mastery or realize one's 'true nature' [3]. Outfit usually expresses one's 'true nature', the world inside people's minds. Dress is also a way to show that people are different, building up a boundary between people themselves and the world. The clothes that people cover their bodies with and how they style them are physically located at a manipulable border [4]. In this sense, dressing freely is psychological and physical freedom because dressing freely is the way for people to express themselves, and the right to control their bodies.

People without dressing freely usually mean their minds and bodies are controlled. This is because they cannot build their boundaries with the world. Moreover, the style of the clothes usually expresses a kind of culture. Due to the lack of dressing freedom, people cannot try other styles of clothing, which means they do not have the chance to be exposed to new cultures. As a result, people's minds have been controlled by the government, which introduced this dress code.

2.2. The cases of no dressing freedom in Iran

In many countries, such as China and the United States, women are free to choose what to wear in public places. For instance, after the reform and opening-up policy in China, people's minds were becoming more open and inclusive, and women's clothing was evolving towards sexy, slim-fitting, and form-fitting styles [5]. This fashion trend quickly spread throughout the whole country, and now it can be seen that women wear a variety of clothing and styles on the street and in other public places. Moreover, according to the First Amendment, Americans generally have the freedom to choose what to wear in public places. People in these countries do not get suspended from school, lose their jobs, or get arrested just because they wear something or do not wear something. Dress freedom is regarded as a basic human right in these countries.

However, in Iran, there is a strict dress code, which is the hijab law. This law affects Iranian women's daily lives, education, and careers. The hijab law asks women to always wear the hijab in public places, and the photos and videos on social media. If women breach the hijab law, they will be arrested and punished by the morality police. On 13 September 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, was arrested for "improper" clothing and died three days later in a hospital. The other women detained by the same police reported that Jina was beaten in the patrol van for resisting the arrest [6]. This shocking news reflected that woman must be careful with their daily clothing because the consequences may be serious.

Additionally, Iranian women's education is limited by the strict dress code. This code is deeply connected with whether female students can study at the university or not. The death of Jina Mahsa Amini started the protest movement called Women, Life, Freedom in Iran. Many students in universities in Iran, such as Tehran University, participated in this protest; they took off their headscarves and sat in protest. Consequently, at least 60 female students were suspended from school [7]. No matter how good their academic performance is, students will be suspended from school if they do not abide by the hijab law.

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Moreover, the hijab law also limited Iranian women's career progression. Women must wear the hijab in workplaces, no matter what job they do, so many of them may feel uncomfortable at work. For instance, working at a high temperature makes women feel even hotter and sweatier because of the hijab. Unfortunately, women cannot take the hijab off because they will lose their jobs if they do; firms do not want the trouble from the morality police. In addition, actresses who breach the hijab law will be banned from performance. Iran's present Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance said, "From a legal point of view, it is not permitted to allow those who have removed the hijab to attend art programs. It has been announced that in this field, the law will be the focus of the plans, and anyone who acts outside the law will be dealt with according to the regulation." [8]. As a result, whether Iranian women have their careers sometimes depends on this piece of cloth, which seriously limits their career progression.

3. Challenges to women's dressing freedom in Iran

Although hijab brings Iranian women many problems and limitations, and some actions have been taken by people in Iran trying to obtain the right for women to dress freely, the situation is still very serious. It is difficult for Iran to change this current situation, and the challenges are from three main regions.

3.1. Challenges from individuals

Now in Iran, many people object to the hijab. Through polling Iranians, 71 percent of men and 74 percent of women disagree with the mandatory imposition of the hijab [9]. People realize that the hijab law has negative impacts on both men and women because this strict law harms women themselves and their families. Iranian people also realize the importance of women having the right to dress freely.

However, things are still difficult to change. Many women do not want to wear hijabs, but they cannot take them off. The potential threat from morality police and the hefty fines makes women too scared to take off their hijab in public places. Many morality police will enforce laws against women for violence, which will cause injuries to women. The massive fine will lead to an aggravation of the financial burden on normal families in Iran. For example, the fine for people who are caught breaking the hijab law for the second time could be as high as $480[2]. Moreover, most careers and companies require women to wear the hijab while working, otherwise, they will not allow women to work. For instance, employees in the public sector who violate the hijab law in their workplace or out could face suspension for up to six months and no opportunities for job promotion [2]. In this case, women must wear a hijab to keep their jobs. Female students have the same worries, students will be expelled from school if they do not wear hijab.

3.2. Challenges from the society

Islam is the religion that the current Iranian government is set on, and Iran has a long history of Iranian women wearing the hijab. "For Islamists, the hijab is a saintly command by God to protect women from men's gaze and persecution" [1]. There was also a period when the Iranian government required women to take off their hijabs, but a few conservative women committed suicide rather than abandon their hijabs [10]. In this case, wearing hijab is a tradition in Iran, and it is a part of their culture; the society will not leave hijab easily.

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The ideal Islamic woman is a pious Muslim who sacrifices herself for her family and society [11]. Additionally, women's bodies should be shown modestly to the public, without sensuality or temptation [1]. The hijab is a tool to cover women's bodies and show them modesty to the public. In this case, society does not encourage Iranian women to achieve self-realization and express themselves in public. Moreover, some people think that the hijab not only serves as a religious obligation but also as a symbol that distinguishes Iranian women from other cultures [12]. Women without a hijab may make some people think these women are not dressed appropriately or violate religious regulations. This pressure from public opinion will prevent women from dressing freely.

3.3. Challenges from the country

Iran is a religious state, meaning that many of its laws and policies are influenced by religious principles. The regime aims to regulate women's appearance with the hijab to maintain control [12]. The hijab is a significant symbol for Islam and Iranian women, the government will not allow women to take off their hijabs because this action is a violation of Islamic religious doctrines. The government criticizes these women as 'non-religious' and punishes them accordingly. For instance, the hijab law stipulates punishments for these women, such as detention and fines. Moreover, the Iranian government rules this country based on Islam; they consider dress freedom for women as a right that will destabilize the Iranian government. In this case, the government will not give back the right for women to dress freely. The hijab is an inner contradiction in Iran, the government trying to control women's bodies, and Iranian women's hope for freedom makes the contradictions more serious. The revolution in Iran for women's dressing freedom faces huge challenges from the country.

4. Countermeasures and future prospects

The challenges in Iran now are very serious, the country is trying to prevent Iranian women from dressing freely. However, the trend of female liberation is unstoppable, women will always fight for their freedom and rights. This serious situation could be changed in three different regions.

4.1. Countermeasures for individuals

Iran is a religious country, and this is their tradition to wear the hijab, but it is incorrect for the government to force women to wear the hijab. One important thing is that women must realize that they have the right to decide what to wear in public places. In this case, women need to obtain an education, particularly higher education. 89 percent of students with university degrees disagree with whether hijab should be mandatory in public [9]. Additionally, receiving an education can provide women with more information from around the world and the opportunity to explore different ideologies. These women will realize that they have the right to choose their outfits; hijab is just a religious choice, and it is their freedom to choose whether they want to wear hijabs or not. No one has the right to force others to do anything. Therefore, women are dissatisfied with the government and the hijab law and start to protest for their dress freedom.

Moreover, another important thing is that women must unite as one to fight for their rights. It will be easier when many people work together to face difficulties. The main resistance to Iranian women's dressing freedom comes from the Iranian government and the traditional religion. Women need to draw on all the strength available, and the main support always comes from themselves.

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4.2. Countermeasures for the society

Society also plays an important role in the revolution of Iranian women's dress freedom. The Iranian society has many feminists and non-governmental organizations. For example, Feminism Every Day, which was founded in 2014 by Nasrin Afzali and other activists, and Voice of Iran's Women Group. These organizations can ask many international women's rights and human rights organizations for help. For example, the United Nations (UN) Women is an organization that focuses on global gender equality and women's empowerment. UN Women can provide Iranian feminist Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with guidance because they have much experience in protecting women's rights. Moreover, UN Women can provide Iranian feminist NGOs with economic aid, which supports organizations to hold activities.

In addition, feminist organizations need to hold campaigns to call for gender equality. This can make people realize how important gender equality is. These events will teach men how women play a significant role in social life, as well as teach women how important they are.

4.3. Countermeasures for the country

Women are an important part of the workforce in Iran. In 2020, the female participation rate in engineering and agriculture was 25 and 55 percent, respectively [2]. The hijab law limits women's job performance. This will limit the economic development of Iran. In addition, the hijab law also limits women's academic performance, which will limit the development of science and technology in Iran. Women also play an important role in science. In several fields such as agribusiness and environment, over 40 percent of female scientists [13]. In this case, the government must release women's rights step by step.

The morality police are the main problem for women because they enforce the law with violence towards women who do not wear hijabs. The government could establish legal supervision institutions to protect women's rights and interests. Additionally, Iran has a very long history of wearing hijabs, so it is impossible to cancel the hijab law at once. The government could bend the dress code slowly. For example, the government could start by allowing women to wear hijabs in a different color to allow them to wear clothes such as dresses and T-shirts, and finally, women can decide whether to wear hijabs or not, depending on their wishes.

5. Conclusion

Iran has a strict dress code known as the hijab law, which seriously affects Iranian women's daily lives, education, and careers. This strict law seriously limits the development of women and will push women into an isolated situation. The death of Jina Mahsa Amini started the protest movement called Women, Life, Freedom in Iran, which was a wide-ranging demonstration. Furthermore, the main challenges for women to reform this situation are from women themselves, society, and the country. This put pressure on women's protests.

This paper presents the current situation for women's dressing freedom in Iran and aims to understand how serious the situation for Iranian women has been. This paper also provides readers with methods about how to improve the situation of women's dressing freedom in Iran. To improve the situation in Iran, three main methods could be taken by the Iranian people. Providing higher education for women, asking international feminist organizations for help, and bending the dress code slowly can all improve the situation. Additionally, this paper hopes to contribute to the freedom

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of Iranian women's dress. However, this paper is based on second-hand data and cannot gain the latest data or interviews from Iranian people.

This topic could be studied in conjunction with political science, which could better explain why the Iranian government wants to restrict women's rights. Deep research on Islam could help understand how important or the meaning of hijab to Islam and Iranian women. This will provide more information about the dressing freedom in Iran and more practical solutions to the challenges to free Iranian women.

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