(This essay is a shortened and revised version of my article "Fractal Scaling of Feminist Politics and the Emergence of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement in Iran," originally published in Social Forces in April 2025.)

The Emergence of Woman, Life, Freedom:

Feminist Friendship Networks and Fractal Forms of Resistance in Iran

Introduction

Following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini—a young Kurdish-Iranian woman—in police custody in September 2022, the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement erupted, marking the most intersectional social uprising in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Although people from all walks of life joined the protests across lines of class, ethnicity, gender, geography, and generation, women played a central role in mobilizing the movement from its earliest days. While their widespread presence may appear spontaneous, this paper argues that it is deeply rooted in a long-standing history of feminist resistance and women's struggles in Iran. Drawing on sociohistorical analysis and introducing the concept of fractal scaling, I offer a multiscalar account of women's everyday resistance to gender-based inequalities. These acts of resistance have challenged both patriarchal sociocultural structures and state-imposed ideological values and norms, extending across social, spatial, and digital domains. More particularly, this essay focuses on the period following the 1979 revolution, highlighting how what I refer to as *feminist friendship networks* (FFNs), which are relationships sustained through everyday interactions and often reactivated in moments of political crisis, laid essential groundwork for the emergence and wide reach of the WLF movement. By examining the dialectical relationship between state political and cultural policies and feminist activism—more broadly, women's resistance—and tracing the recursive scaling of feminist praxis across time and space, this research offers a framework for understanding why women emerged as central agents in the WLF movement, and how their historical struggles enabled them to assume this pivotal role.

Fractal Scaling of Feminist Praxis: A Sociological Perspective on Collective Action

This section develops a sociological framework for analyzing feminist politics in Iran by foregrounding the spatial and scalar dimensions of resistance. Rather than viewing feminist activism solely through the lens of formal organizations or episodic protest, I draw attention to the embedded, everyday

practices through which women negotiate and resist intersecting systems of power. This theoretical lens allows us to see feminist politics not as isolated events or bounded organizations, but as dynamic and distributed practices that have enabled women's sustained presence and pivotal role in movements like Woman, Life, Freedom. Feminist politics refers to the everyday and organized practices through which women resist intersecting systems of domination by cultivating solidarities, reclaiming space, and shaping social change across formal and informal arenas. In Iran, these politics are multifaceted practices that challenge intersecting systems of patriarchy, economic inequality, state repression, and cultural marginalization. Far from being limited to formal activism, feminist resistance operates across decentralized and community-rooted networks. These networks emerged and evolved in both "invited" (state-sanctioned) and "invented" (grassroots) spaces, as women navigated patriarchal constraints to cultivate solidarities rooted in care, shared struggle, and political commitment.

Drawing on Miraftab's (2004) concepts of invited and invented spaces, I argue that in the context of Iran, invited spaces such as NGOs and cultural centers, as well as invented spaces like reading circles and informal gatherings, have functioned as key sites of feminist praxis. Women often used invited spaces as springboards to create their own invented ones. For instance, attending a talk on women's rights at a cultural center might lead to informal conversations, shared reflections, and the formation of solidarities among participants. These encounters frequently led to the formation of informal gatherings or organizing circles outside the formal structure. This dynamic use of space reflects the creativity and adaptability of feminist actors in Iran, who continuously expanded their networks by blurring the boundaries between formal and informal political engagement. To better conceptualize the relational and enduring structures that sustain feminist mobilization, I introduce the concept of *feminist friendship networks*, building on Bayat's (2013) distinction between passive and active networks. FFNs refer to informal, intergenerational webs of connection grounded in shared feminist agency and mutual recognition. These networks scale feminist politics diachronically through a range of (in)visible acts of resistance, adapting to shifting spatiotemporal conditions, particularly since the 1979 revolution. They are formed and maintained through everyday interactions—in both personal and social contexts, online and offline—and are continuously reconstituted by different generations of women. Unlike formal organizations, FFNs do not rely on centralized leadership or institutional structures. Rather, they are held together by trust, affective labor, and shared memory. They serve as informal archives of collective struggle, preserving embodied knowledge and emotional energy even during periods of repression. While they may seem dormant during such times, they remain active in

subtle ways—through personal storytelling, social media posts, or quiet acts of solidarity. In moments of political rupture, these latent connections are reactivated, transforming FFNs into powerful political tools for mobilization. They become strategic infrastructures that enable rapid, decentralized, and scalable resistance across physical and digital spaces. These networks played a foundational role in initiatives like *the One Million Signatures Campaign* (2006–2008) and became especially critical in the WLF movement. Their capacity to adapt and expand across multiple scales contributed to the movement's transformative impact, reshaping Iran's sociopolitical landscape through deeply rooted, feminist forms of collective action.

To analyze how feminist politics in Iran have grown and sustained themselves without centralized leadership or institutional support, I introduce the concept of fractal scaling. Borrowed from complexity theory (Mandelbrot 1983) and adapted through sociolinguistic (Karimzad 2020, 2021, Karimzad and Catedral 2022) and sociopolitical frameworks (Tarrow 2005; 2011), fractal scaling refers to the recursive, adaptive replication of patterns across multiple scales such as social, temporal, spatial, and digital. Fractal scaling offers a way to understand how contentious politics, particularly social movements, grow by forming interconnected sites of resistance that together create a complex yet unified framework of political action. This framework expands in multiple directions, crossing temporal and spatial boundaries as activism spreads horizontally through decentralized networks. In this context, "decentralized" means that there are no top-down leadership structures; no single leader or central authority directs the movement. Still, within these fractal networks, some nodes may take on more active organizing roles at smaller scales. These localized forms of leadership, however, are limited and do not amount to broad centralization. Instead, they are part of the dynamic and distributed nature of the wider network, where agency and influence are shared across many interconnected nodes. In the case of the WLF movement, I argue that FFNs have played a key role in enabling this kind of scaling. Built over generations through shared struggles at the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity/nationality, age, and class, these networks are rooted in care and emotional support as core feminist practices. They serve not only as organizing structures but also as vital spaces for sustaining feminist praxis through solidarity and collective empowerment. FFNs horizontal, decentralized dynamic enabled feminist networks to expand beyond hierarchical models, fostering inclusive and multilayered structures of resistance. By embracing those marginalized in different ways, ethnically, geographically, gender wise, or socially, these networks bridged local and transnational struggles.

Methodology and Historical Context

This study is based on archival research, offline and online ethnographic research, and digital observation focused on women's agency and feminist movements in Iran. Drawing from both physical archives—such as *Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran* and the *National Library of Iran*—and digital platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and feminist websites, the research combines offline and online sources to trace the development of feminist resistance. Ethnographic insights stem from over a decade of active participation in women's led NGOs and public sites of organizing in Iran. By contextualizing this empirical data within sociohistorical analysis, the study reveals how women's forms of resistance have adapted in response to shifting state policies and political environments. This framework illuminates the dialectical interaction between state control and feminist praxis, foregrounding the role of FFNs in the fractal expansion of feminist politics.

The genealogy of women's resistance in Iran

The history of women's resistance in Iran reflects a long-standing and evolving trajectory of struggle, beginning in the mid-19th century. From their involvement in the Babi movement and the Tobacco Protest of the 1800s to their militant participation in the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), women have consistently challenged cultural, social, and political constraints. During the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), women seized new opportunities created by top-down modernization, yet their activism was tolerated only insofar as it aligned with state agendas. When it did not—such as in the case of forced unveiling—women faced repression. By the late 1960s and 1970s, amid a rapidly modernizing but politically centralized and controlled political system, and in alignment with global waves of anti-imperialist and leftist mobilizations, many young women joined revolutionary and underground leftist movements. These women, often alienated by the state's construction of an idealized, domesticated woman citizen aligned with monarchy-led modernization, sought alternative political homes in oppositional spaces. However, within these movements, class struggle was typically prioritized, while gender issues were sidelined or dismissed. This *dual exclusion*—by both the state and anti-regime movements—shaped the trajectory of feminist resistance in Iran, laying the groundwork for more autonomous and intersectional forms of activism that would later culminate in the WLF movement.

Post-Revolutionary Shifts and the Continuum of Resistance

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, with its unique blend of theocratic and republican elements, significantly reshaped the sociopolitical terrain for women in Iran. While many women initially viewed the revolution as a transformative opportunity, the new political order swiftly imposed restrictive policies, most notably the 1980 decree on mandatory hijab. These measures symbolized deeper efforts to control women's bodies and curtail their civil and political rights. Simultaneously, leftist movements deprioritized gender concerns in favor of class struggle, prompting women to form autonomous spaces to address sidelined feminist issues. The outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) further complicated gender dynamics, as women assumed expanded roles in the workforce and public life, even as they remained excluded from formal political power. These shifts led to the emergence of new repertoires of resistance, especially among women who may not have identified as feminists but nonetheless demanded their social and economic rights. This period laid the groundwork for a continuum of feminist activism—adaptive, persistent, and responsive to evolving material and political conditions—that continues to shape the landscape of resistance today.

Post-War Economic Shifts and the Reemergence of Feminist Networks

In the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Rafsanjani administration (1989–1997) implemented market-oriented economic reforms that contributed to the rise of a new middle class. This shifting social landscape gave rise to a generation of young women who increasingly demanded access to public, cultural, and political life. While formal political participation remained largely restricted, women began organizing informal gatherings—such as *mahfels*—that gradually evolved into autonomous spaces for critical dialogue, mutual learning, and feminist engagement. These invented spaces enabled women from diverse ideological backgrounds to cultivate feminist discourses, form friendship networks, and challenge both state ideological values and laws and patriarchal norms. Simultaneously, women's increasing participation in higher education, despite gendered restrictions, marked a turning point in their public visibility. By the early 2000s, women had surpassed men in university enrollment across multiple fields. At the same time, the widespread—though officially illegal—adoption of satellite television disrupted the state's monopoly over media, granting Iranian households unprecedented access to alternative representations of gender, rights, and everyday life from around the world. These multidimensional shifts—rising educational attainment and exposure to transnational media—reconfigured the sociopolitical landscape, expanding young women's imaginaries and intensifying their aspirations for autonomy and civil liberties. Amid these

contradictions—economic liberalization alongside persistent political and cultural restrictions—grassroots feminist movements reemerged. They navigated the constraints of invited spaces while generating new invented spaces for organizing and expression. This era laid critical groundwork for the fractal expansion of feminist politics across both analog and digital domains.

Reformist era (1997–2005) and the expansion of invited and invented spaces

By the 1997, approximately half of Iran's population—then around 69 million—was under the age of 25, marking a significant youth bulge that profoundly shaped the country's sociopolitical dynamics. This emerging generation, shaped by expanded access to higher education and exposed to alternative cultural discourses through media and informal networks, began articulating new sociocultural and political demands. Many young people challenged the state's narrowly defined ideals of citizenship, gender roles, and public expression. It was in this context that Mohammad Khatami, a reformist cleric within the Islamic Republic's framework, was elected president in 1997. His presidency (1997–2005), widely known as the reform era, introduced a period of relative openness that enabled the growth of feminist organizing. Women engaged both invited spaces—such as cultural centers, NGOs, and university programs—and invented ones like reading circles and informal gatherings. These spaces fostered the development of FFNs that crossed generational, ideological, and geographic divides, laying crucial groundwork for future mobilizations. During the early 2000s, the internet, introduced by the state, became another site of feminist appropriation, as activists created weblogs and websites to discuss rights, share experiences, and organize campaigns. This groundwork led to the launch of the *One Million Signatures Campaign* (2006–2008), a grassroots initiative that marked a turning point in feminist activism in Iran. Faced with systemic and structural barriers to engaging with formal political institutions—especially in getting women's rights issues onto the parliamentary agenda—feminist activists shifted their strategy. Rather than relying solely on access to state channels, they focused on raising legal awareness among ordinary citizens. The campaign aimed to collect one million signatures in support of changing discriminatory laws against women and intended to present these demands directly to the parliament. Structured around decentralized organizing and horizontal networks, the campaign connected women in major urban centers like Tehran with those in peripheral regions such as Kurdistan. Emphasizing face-to-face conversations, legal literacy, and everyday encounters, it extended feminist networks across class, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. These connections laid a

durable foundation that would later support mobilization during the WLF movement, forming a resilient and adaptive base for feminist politics in Iran.

Digital Activism and the Online-Offline Nexus

Just as feminist activists transformed many invited physical spaces into sites of grassroots organizing, they also strategically appropriated digital spaces made available through state-enabled internet infrastructure. While in the early 2000s, feminist weblogs and websites emerged as important venues for raising consciousness, building networks, and articulating demands for gender justice, with the introduction and spread of global social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and later Instagram and YouTube, women—particularly the younger generation—found increasingly accessible and flexible digital spaces to voice dissent and expand their friendship networks. This digital turn intensified around the time of the 2009 Green Movement, a nationwide uprising demanding political reform, during which many young people—and especially feminist activists—faced state repression. These experiences further politicized digital participation.

Throughout the 2010s, Facebook and Instagram became platforms not only for activism but also for everyday self-expression. Women increasingly shared images and videos from their private lives, using these platforms to assert agency, defy social norms, and challenge dominant gender ideologies. In doing so, they transformed personal digital content into political discourse. Over time, these digital platforms evolved into strategic sites for feminist resistance, linking activists inside and outside Iran and enabling new forms of transnational solidarity. By the late 2010s, digital media had become central to the feminist repertoire, allowing women to amplify their demands, organize campaigns, and challenge discriminatory laws from within increasingly constrained physical spaces. These digital arenas, much like earlier invented spaces, functioned as dynamic and adaptive sites of feminist struggle—crucial to the fractal scaling of resistance across geographic, generational, and ideological boundaries. These acts were not only expressions of dissent but also mechanisms for building and reinforcing FFNs. They exemplified how digital media could materialize and amplify feminist politics across scales, from intimate to transnational.

Several feminist digital campaigns that preceded the WLF movement exemplify this dynamic. Campaigns such as *My Stealthy Freedom* (2014), *White Wednesdays* (2017), and *Girls of Revolution Street* (2017) used social media to challenge compulsory hijab and reclaim public space. These campaigns

gained traction during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), a centrist politician who positioned himself as responsive to the demands of Iran's younger generation. Among his electoral promises was the expansion of internet infrastructure and increased digital freedom—an appeal that resonated with millions of tech-savvy youths. Although Rouhani's administration remained constrained by the broader political system, the growth of high-speed internet during his presidency enabled new forms of online engagement and made digital activism more accessible to women across the country. In *My Stealthy Freedom* and *White Wednesdays*, women posted photos and videos of themselves without hijab—often in private or semi-private spaces, or while wearing white scarves as symbols of solidarity. These acts subtly challenged state narratives around modesty, visibility, and female propriety. In contrast, *Girls of Revolution Street* marked a bold and highly public form of protest, as young women unveiled in crowded urban spaces, standing on utility boxes and waving white scarves—acts that were filmed and widely circulated online. These performances, while personally risky, became emblematic of a new feminist presence in Iran's digital public sphere. Together, these campaigns disrupted the state's control over gendered visibility, expanded feminist counter-publics, and established the digital repertoires that would later shape the viral and affective dimensions of the WLF movement.

Feminist politics in the Woman Life Freedom movement: reclaiming public and private spaces

In such a context—where women were actively asserting their presence in both physical and digital public spheres, where young people were increasingly connected to the global world through the internet, and where women especially were utilizing invited and invented spaces to claim their rights and reshape everyday life through creative and resistant practices—Ebrahim Raisi assumed the presidency in 2021. A conservative cleric with little popular appeal, Raisi came to power amid widespread disillusionment, as many Iranians—especially the youth—boycotted the elections in protest of candidates who failed to address their real concerns. In the context of increasing repression under Raisi's presidency (2021–2023), women's access to both formal and informal political spaces was severely controlled. The morality police intensified their presence, and digital surveillance expanded, shrinking civic space. Despite this, women mobilized through new tactics of resistance, reclaiming both physical and digital spaces. Mahsa (Jina) Amini's tragic death in in 2022 in 'morality police' custody ignited nationwide protests, starting in Kurdistan and rapidly spreading. FFNs quickly

circulated calls for protest, leading to the first demonstrations in various cities, particularly Tehran, within two days of the news of Amini's death. The protests soon spread across large and small cities, rural and urban areas, and among diverse segments of the population. Young people, in particular, engaged in highly innovative forms of resistance. The movement, known as Woman, Life, Freedom, embodied accumulated feminist experiences and moved beyond centralized leadership models. Through fractal scaling, resistance expanded horizontally—across generations of women who shared a collective memory of struggle, and across homes, neighborhoods, schools, universities, and digital platforms, without relying on hierarchical structures. Protesters used everyday objects and gestures such as banging pots, cutting hair, covering surveillance cameras with sanitary pads as tools of subversion. Teenage girls played a leading role in both offline and online activism, often facing severe state retaliation. Digital activism amplified the movement across multiple scales: local, regional, national, and transnational, linking people across disparate geographies and time-spaces, and connecting FFNs throughout the diaspora. Artistic and cultural practices such as songs, murals, poetry, and dance, transformed ordinary acts into feminist resistance. The WLF movement reimagined solidarity and activism through these interconnected networks, sustaining defiance across private, public, and transnational spheres.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown that feminist politics have been fundamental to the formation, growth, and resilience of the WLF movement across geographical, social, and digital scales. Tracing the long history of feminist activism in Iran, I have demonstrated how women have continuously adapted to and resisted structural patriarchy, both state-sponsored and societal, by creating and repurposing spaces for resistance. These efforts reflect a deep awareness of material conditions and a collective commitment to transform constraints into opportunities for feminist praxis. A key turning point in this history was the One Million Signatures campaign, a grassroots effort that expanded feminist activism into marginalized areas and fostered lasting networks of solidarity. These networks, though often dormant, have remained resilient and ready to mobilize in times of political rupture, as seen during the WLF uprising. For activists in exile, digital platforms have provided vital tools to continue their engagement, maintain visibility, and build transnational connections with the Iranian diaspora and global progressive movements. To conceptualize this evolving landscape, I introduced fractal scaling, a non-linear, multidirectional process through which acts of resistance replicate and adapt

across contexts. This concept helps explain how feminist networks have expanded from local neighborhoods to transnational arenas without hierarchical leadership, emphasizing a horizontal and inclusive mode of organizing. These networks have embraced diverse forms of marginalization, bridging local and global contexts and amplifying feminist activism beyond Iran's borders. Ultimately, the WLF movement exemplifies how feminist politics, sustained through networks of feminist friendship, generate a rooted and multiscalar resistance. Although the movement is no longer visibly active in the streets, the infrastructures built during this period persist. These networks, driven by a collective sense of hope, remain ready to reignite and mobilize across various scales when the next moment of rupture arrives.

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