CASE: IRANIAN WOMAN CONFRONTED ON STREET

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1. HOW PROTESTERS, SUCH AS PARTICIPANTS IN THE "WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM" MOVEMENT, USE SOCIAL MEDIA, INCLUDING THE ROLE THAT IMAGES OF UNVEILED WOMEN PLAY IN DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS.

In the face of stringent state regulation of conventional media in Iran, social media platforms assumed a critical role in the 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests. The participants of the movement utilised the medium for diverse purposes, offsetting lack of alternative resources for information sharing and coordination under authoritarian conditions. An appropriate framework for exploring the role of social media is through differentiating between posts that were directed at domestic and international communities which sought to accomplish different goals.

Posts catering to domestic audiences were predominantly in Persian, posted in Iran and centred around disseminating ground level intel. For example, the news of Masha Amini's death, which sparked protests around the country, was first reported by [Niloofar Hamedi](#) in a picture she posted on Twitter showing Amini's parents mourning at their daughter's death. This picture became the face of movement in its early days. [Elahe Mohammadi](#) covered the funeral ceremony and reported on the first public mobilisation in Saqez town where the protests began. Although the "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan is not novel to the 2022 protests and has been used since the early 2000s by Kurdish Iranian women, it resurfaced at the funeral ceremony for Amini. The social media coverage of the protest resulted in this chant becoming the [official call](#) of the protesters. Once the protest started, [Yalda Moaiery](#), a photojournalist, shared graphic visuals of retaliation by the state against the protesters. Content created by these and many more journalists/activists was widely shared across Instagram, Twitter and other social media sites which helped inform the public about what was going on and documented how the movement progressed.

During the protest in Saqez women took off their scarves, chanted against the government to which police retaliated by firing at the crowds, which went viral on social media. However, it is important to note that removing the scarf as a form of protest is not a novel occurrence and has a rich history in Iranian feminist protests. Videos of past protests were also commonly shared on social media during this time. Social media would have likely played a significant role in coordination efforts during the movement, however curfew-style mobile network disruptions, blackouts in hotspots and bans on social media limited its use in the said capacity. Within *Farsi*, [mentions of Masha Amini fell](#) within the Iranian social media ecosystem two weeks after the protests started. Despite these barriers, many Iranians depended on Telegram as a source of coordination which allowed anonymity due to a proxy feature in the app - however this remained limited due to internet outages.

On the other hand, posts targeting international audiences were largely in English and had a strong condemnation of the current Iranian government. Many [Iranian journalists in the diaspora](#) played an important role in amplifying the posts still coming out of Iran on social media. Videos of police brutality were common here. It could be argued that propagating such narratives did result in political actions. According to a Reuters report US, UK and EU imposed sanctions against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who played a key role in suppression of protests. Sanctions on the IRGC Cooperative Foundation and five of its board members, Deputy Minister of Intelligence and Security Naser Rashedi and four senior IRGC commanders in Iran were motivated to financially hurt alleged funders of oppression.

2. THE NATURE AND GRAVITY OF THE RISKS RELATED TO CIRCULATING PICTURES OR VIDEOS ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHOWING UNVEILED WOMEN IN IRAN AND HOW THAT SHOULD IMPACT META'S CONTENT MODERATION.

The choice to moderate images of women not wearing a *hijab* is significant and delicate. The potential dangers for individuals appearing in such images, including the risk of detention, are real and justified concerns for women in Iran. Nonetheless, the act of removing the hijab as a form of protest against governmental oppression has deep roots in the Iranian feminist movement. Women engaging in this form of protest are conscious of the potential repercussions but deliberately engage in this act of defiance as a strategic opposition to authority. Images of this gesture are shared willingly, conveying solidarity and crafting a shared narrative. Yet, choosing to conceal these images of recognized resistance not only hinders the achievement of their intended goals, but also fails to diminish the risks these women confront.

The 1979 regime change resulted in laws that made wearing a *hijab* compulsory. This forced obligation, coupled with escalating restrictions on women's participation in various aspects of society, led to a growing sense of misrepresentation and disenchantment among many Iranian women. They felt that their identity and agency was being constrained by these regulations, which not only dictated their dress but also symbolised broader limitations on their freedoms and roles in society. This law was captured in the Islamic Penal Code of Iran which subjects women to "imprisonment from three months to one year and pay a fine of 1,500,000 to 6,000,000, and also be flogged up to 74 lashes" for not abiding by the dress code".

These severe laws are rigorously enforced, yet this should not solely dictate the actions of social media platforms. Moderating this content out of a superficial concern for the safety limits the main argument of the protesters. Removing the *hijab* (head scarves) as a symbolic defiance to the law has become a well known and well celebrated form of protest in Iran. In 2017, a picture gained prominence on Twitter which showed [Vida Movahed](#) standing on a utility box in an Iranian street without her hijab as a protest. This picture became viral and known as 'Girl of Enghelab Street'. When Vida was detained hashtag دختر_خیابان_انقلاب_کجاست# ("Where is the girl of Enghelab Street") became viral and many women reenacted the symbol of taking off their *hijab* across Iran. Throughout 2018 and 2019, more women protested against the *hijab* law by publicly removing their head scarves and were subsequently arrested. In 2018, up to 29 women were arrested during protests in 2018 against the *hijab* law.

Therefore, images of women without hijabs should be regarded as expressions of protest. These women, fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly embrace the added danger to demonstrate

their solidarity with the movement and to inspire others to draw courage from their actions. In an interview with Reuters, the anonymous protesters asserted that they are aware of the government intelligence apparatus collecting information on them, yet they remain steadfast in their commitment to this form of protest. Since the 2022 protest, Iran has changed its ways of monitoring compliance with this law. The presence of religious police on the streets has reduced substantially, however CCTV has been installed across the country. This intrusive and passive monitoring methodology will make each offender of the law more likely to be identified by the state. However, even in the wake of such developments, many activists have come forward and confessed that they will continue to protest by removing the *hijab* even if it leads to arrest.

Meta's content moderation policies therefore need to understand the nuances of the situation. Although the decision to moderate such content stems from a duty to safeguard users, in reality, it risks infringing on an organic and critical national movement. Women who choose to remove the *hijab* understand that the government can be monitoring these acts through their intelligence apparatus even if such content is not posted online. The content is shared on social media because of its ability to inspire masses and create a unified movement across the country. If social media platforms decide to remove this content, they will not necessarily protect the women who choose to take off their hijab, rather become a roadblocks to a deliberate symbol of protest.

4. META'S ENFORCEMENT OF ITS CONTENT MODERATION POLICIES FOR PERSIAN-LANGUAGE EXPRESSION RELATED TO THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN IRAN.

There are longstanding criticisms of Meta's content moderation policies in Iran, particularly allegations of the policies favoring pro-government positions. In May 2022, a BBC investigation indicated that Islamic intelligence officers bribed content moderators to remove anti-government speech on Instagram. Meta denied these allegations and publicly confirmed that there are regular audits of their outsourced moderators. In recent months, Meta's content moderation in Iran has garnered fresh waves of criticism, particularly against the backdrop of the political situation in the country.

Firstly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is designated under Meta's Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI) policy, however there are repeated allegations of inaccurate and inconsistent enforcement of related content. This can largely be attributed to under-investments and Persian language (*Farsi*) classifiers are not mature, nor adequately trained in dialects such as *Dari*, *Achomi* and *Khunsari*, that may also be used to express. As a result, hashtags condemning the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps are inaccurately blocked and activists experience account restrictions. We recommend that Meta conducts an independent audit and publishes the results of the precision of hostile speech classifiers in *Farsi*.

Secondly, Meta's Violence and Incitement policy have reportedly flagged rhetorical threats during protests in Iran. In January 2023, the Oversight Board overturned Meta's decision to remove *"Death to Khamenei"* indicating that the phrase was used as an expression of dissent. At the time, the Board recommended that Meta's policies be revised to protect speech during protests, however, in September 2022 feminist protests, civil society reported on similar over-enforcement of political dissent. It is therefore critical Meta amend its Violence and Incitement policies to reflect on local context and allow rhetorical threats during a defined period of time, i.e. during protests.

Thirdly, human rights groups fear that the Iranian regime often uses coordinated reporting to abuse Meta's system and take down content. While the volume of reporting typically does not have a bearing on content decisions, it is likely repeated reporting or false reporting can lead to incorrect enforcement. Therefore, it is important that Meta provides more transparency around its appeals process to ensure that activists can use scaled tools to appeal against inaccurate enforcement, and that these appeals are prioritized during a protest. Meta should also ensure there is human-in-the-loop when assessing appeals to ensure context is taken into account. This is especially important given how extensively social media is used, including via VPNs, by Iranian activists to respond to the country's political situation.

And lastly, we note that Meta prioritized safety of Iranian women and Instagram's classifiers flagged 'unveiled women' as a potential violation because of Meta's policies around it. While this may be true in certain contexts, it is imperative that Meta engages with regional teams and external civil society to issue policy exceptions during times of protest to ensure that its intent around safety does not inadvertently suppress necessary political dissent. In this instance, given the Iranian feminist movement focused heavily on pushing back on mandatory dress codes, Meta should have issued a time-bound policy exception to *allow* content showing unveiled women.