

Iran's #MeToo movement challenges patriarchy and western stereotypes

The movement is part of a global outpouring of anger against male privilege, with Iranian women as agents who do not need white saviours.

[Sara Tafakori](#)

1 September 2020

It's been called an Iranian #MeToo movement, and it is. Thousands of women in Iran - and some men - are going online to speak about the sexual assault and harassment they experienced. What is crucially important, at what promises to be a historic turning point in Iranian women's struggle for their rights, is to set the movement clearly in its proper local and global context, rather than locating it in terms of the familiar binaries of East and West, as much of the coverage in the coming weeks and months will do.

This is an article which has been in the making for years, although I never thought there would be a revolutionary online commitment to naming names and to speaking out against #rape (#Tajavaz), #sexual harassment (#Azar-e Jensi), and #perpetrators (#Motajaves). Nor, probably, did the brave women who - unlike me - have spoken out against their abusers. It's been over two weeks now: hashtags are still pouring out, naming more names, and it does not seem that they are going to stop soon. 'Let's build a hashtag storm', said a tweet.

As a media anthropologist and gender studies academic, I have been following this eruption of rage and pain from the beginning, but I noticed how difficult it was for me to start writing about it, since it is partly my story - the story of my eight years as a journalist in Iran. I have not been surprised to see many names of men whom I never dared to call out for their actions, many of whom I considered as colleagues and friends, who would make 'benign' sexual references and/or advances, who would tell you to 'loosen up', not to be 'provincial' or 'old-fashioned' - using a discourse which associated liberated metropolitan modernity - not (be it noted) religion or tradition - with female sexual subordination. In turn, I was expected to be 'enlightened' and 'modern' enough to regard all this as male joking around, in order to protect their feelings.

There has been a dramatic change in what it is now possible to talk about, and how it is framed. In 2018, in the wake of [the Harvey Weinstein revelations](#), *Sharq (The East)*, a prominent left-of-centre newspaper in Iran, ran an [article](#) by Mahzad Elyassi. This was the first article that not only reflected on #MeToo, but introduced a local connection, sharing Elyassi's own experience of how, as a 21-year old in the early 2000s, she had to fend off sexual advances from a famous Iranian film director, who was not named in the article.

In our conversations over the past few days, when I asked her about reactions to her piece back then, she told me the response was basically zero; one woman shared her own story, but didn't want to speak out. In a follow-up article a while later, Elyassi concluded that 'perhaps we [Iranians] are not ready for it', that #MeToo was for privileged whites only, at least at that time. As she points out, the current movement in Iran actually seems to involve women from smaller as well as larger cities, and comprises a range of political as well as economic backgrounds. In that sense, it is more intersectional than the original movement of 2018.

The first hashtag storm was built quickly in early August around two cases, the second involving an internationally famous artist, one of those 'national treasures' who, more often than not in Iran, are men. These cases sparked empathy, but also fury at women who want

'more followers', who are 'attention-seeking', and 'do everything that it takes'- which in this case meant willfully 'lying' and making up stories. These patterns of insult and abuse will be familiar. They speak to 'toxic masculinity', to use the well-known term, as an integral element of mediated global culture. (This, of course, supposes there is or was a 'healthy' masculinity, inside of the system of gender, as opposed to becoming a 'healthy' human being). It speaks to the idea of 'popular misogyny', as Sarah Banet-Weiser has termed it, which accompanies 'popular feminism' in the global media 'economy of visibility'.

Unlike in the US, however, the first set of revelations, using the hashtag #rape, did not involve a powerful celebrity, but an art school graduate and bookshop assistant, who was later arrested by the police. This 'ordinary guy' would invite female colleagues and friends over to eat and drink homemade wine, taking the opportunity to slip a drug into their drink. Women woke up in his bed without remembering much of the previous night. One woman posted the story of her shame, her anxiety, the fact she kept quiet for years.

Within a couple of hours, there was an eruption of similar stories, with women recounting how he would verbally humiliate them afterwards. What adds a layer of complexity which has not been addressed so far in western media stories, is that when the police eventually decided to intervene and encourage victims to come forward, they had to specifically state that they would not be arresting people for having illegal (unmarried) sex or drinking alcohol, so no one should worry. Given that the Islamic Republic is a political institution which applies sharia law and forces women to publicly veil themselves, this approach occasioned much debate on social media about how to engage with a politically regressive system in a way that would not involve completely rejecting its demands. A further, much discussed, complication was the likely consequence if the accusations against the man were upheld, given that the legal punishment for rape is execution.

At first, the responses to this case, from both men and women, were warmly empathetic and sympathetic to the victims – there were very few 'you should have realised' comments, or observations that an invitation to drink tea or wine is just another expression for 'Netflix and chill'. Within days there were new hashtags, such as #sexual harassment, where women would post stories of assault and abuse that had a much more 'everyday' quality. There was a change in the emotional atmosphere during this second wave, a new contentiousness to the online comments.

This time there were many comments, mainly but not exclusively from men, to the effect that 'women are taking this too far' – that women 'misunderstand' normal sexual advances as harassment, alongside remarks in the vein of: 'if she didn't want me to kiss her, why didn't she say so clearly'. The phrase 'don't trivialise it' became common across different platforms, rhetorically drawing a line between rape, as a serious matter, and claims of sexual harassment, cast as not only less serious, but also as staging a claim to an 'undeserved' victimhood.

Nonetheless, the movement is continuously refining its strategies and educating itself in response. On 25 August, stories started circulating about a previous boss of mine, accusing him of pressuring women to have sex with him. In response to those who objected that the women were not forced to sleep with him, there have been frequent comments about the compulsion that stems from 'unequal power relations'. People remind each other constantly not to victim-blame. Despite or because of their differences, women throughout Iran - and the diaspora - feel a solidarity with each other that is made possible through talking about the pain and suffering of being a woman in misogynistic environments. If complexity is missing from western media portrayals of Iran, so too is the sort of framing that highlights the global, transnational commonalities to women's experiences of oppression and how it is resisted.

I am relaying these events not only because stories matter, but because it matters who tells the stories. Iranian women are active producers of knowledge; they are not looking for a spokesperson to represent or narrate their experiences. Neither are we reducible to exotic

spectacles of exceptional vulnerability for western audiences. Both our vulnerabilities and our forms of agency, as women, are far from unique. As such, this movement is part of a global outpouring of anger against male privilege. We can call it popular feminism, social media feminism... but this feminism which centres around individual voice, and self-empowerment, has - whisper it - a certain universality.

'Hashtags are emancipating after all; no one can say otherwise after the Iranian #MeToo' as someone tweeted. The affordances of social media allow and enable a myriad of private spheres, it is true - the 'economy of visibility' is partly to do with self-commodification - but it also contains the potential for marginalised voices to create alternative public spheres - 'intimate publics', based around shared feelings - that connect the personal to the political, and the national to the transnational, to confront the misogynist narratives that would seek to stifle those voices through practices of shaming, or the threat of being shamed.

Sure, as feminists in many countries have long argued, it would be better if women's rights campaigners were able to meet physically, agree structures, demands and a line of march, elect spokespeople, in an open and democratic way. But the accelerated temporality made possible by social media should make us rethink critiques of 'spontaneous' movements, which have not only been underestimated by feminist activists in Iran, by the global left more generally.

Instead of the picture of the Islamic Republic of Iran as all-encompassing authoritarian unity, as it is so often framed in the West, what we see is a much more complex image of struggle against sexual assault and harassment. An article in the Washington Post has presented women's protests as directed against 'the regime itself'. Yes, the movement has emerged within the Islamic Republic, but its points of orientation are to a great extent, as I have argued, global and universal: the primary referent of the women speaking out is neither the state nor the regime; it is the very misogynist and patriarchal structures of both workplace and society within which these women's lives are embedded. And yes, the men accused include clerics and employees of the state broadcaster, but many of those in the firing line have nothing directly to do with the 'regime'.

In truth, this moment of Iranian women makes feminist narratives which seek lessons from the 'liberal' West appear distinctly shopworn. In the Washington Post article, co-authored by the well-known Iranian campaigner against the compulsory hijab, Masih Alinejad, and the writer Roya Hakakian, a central contention is that Iranian #MeToo exposes the illusion that the hijab could have protected women against abusive men - as though the women posting their stories didn't already know this. Their standpoint, essentially, is that the Islamic Republic is - exceptionally - predicated upon the abuse of women - as though state power and patriarchy are not intertwined within western countries, or, indeed, elsewhere.

The rule of law, they further argue, applies in the West, but not in Iran. This is a misleading simplification: it denies or reduces the complexity of the movement and its origins inside Iran - and it simultaneously dismisses the gendered and racialised problematics of the justice systems in the West. I am wary of this appropriation of the Iranian women's movement for a political agenda which portrays us as always seeking to catch up and learn from the West.

Given that #MeToo as a hashtag, a movement, and an affect of outrage originated in the US in October 2017, as thousands of woman spoke out against their abusers, and that it followed in the wake of the Women's March in Washington in January 2017 provoked by Trump's comments about 'pussy-grabbing', the very use of the term 'Me Too' by Iranian women is a rebuke to those who would identify the West as the realm of freedom and the East as the place of women's oppression. This is the same administration which is 'weaponizing women's rights' (as Niki Akhavan put it in 2018), in order to paint Iran as a uniquely repressive state, for its own geopolitical reasons.

What does this mean for the women's movement against male sexual abuse globally? To begin with, any transnational feminist solidarity movement worth its salt has to recognise that 'barbarism' begins at home, *wherever that is* - and 'home' can be taken in both personal and national senses. In so doing, two things have to be left behind: firstly, the 'white saviour' complex - the notion of 'saving brown women from brown men'; secondly, a fake 'anti-imperialist' nativism that passes off its oppressive agenda as the 'authenticity' of 'our' traditions.

We need a global solidarity movement that mediates effectively between 'home and the world' (to quote Rahul Rao, following Rabindranath Tagore), that scorns national particularism, but does not make the mistake of placing all its faith in a liberal international order that has always incorporated a dimension of colonial violence. As Frantz Fanon recognised, international solidarity is built on a dialogue with and between nationally-situated struggles.