

Contested Visibility: Mapping Mediation Opportunities in Iranian Digital Feminist Activism

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This article examines how Iranian feminist activists navigate the ambivalence of digital visibility: strategically appropriating platform affordances to contest gendered inequalities and circulate feminist counter-narratives, while confronting the constraints of visibility under patriarchal authoritarianism. It engages critically with Bart Cammaerts's *mediation opportunity structure* and proposes to de-Westernize the framework—developed to analyze protests in liberal democratic, “Western” polities—to capture how feminist protest repertoires achieve the status of media spectacle in authoritarian contexts. Drawing on a comparative frame analysis of five Iranian feminist hybrid mobilizations between 2017 and 2022, I argue that digital visibility allows embodied vulnerability, a condition of gendered precarity under patriarchy, to function as both a constraint and an opportunity. This dynamic unfolds through two distinct protest repertoires that I term *the collective witnessing of individual vulnerability* and *the collective witnessing of collective vulnerability*. In confronting a political terrain marked by state surveillance and coercion, misogynistic backlash, discursive delegitimization, and geopolitical co-optation, activists perform embodied vulnerability as a mediation opportunity and a mode of feminist political resistance.

Keywords: mediation opportunity structure, digital feminist activism, Iranian feminism, patriarchal authoritarianism, digital visibility, embodied vulnerability

The growing popularity of digital platforms in Iranian society coincided with the 2005 conservative takeover of the presidency, intensifying the suppression of women's rights activists and their media channels. This led to “the most discriminatory conditions for Iranian women” (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 211),

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triggering a new wave of migration among feminist activists (Tohidi, 2016) and pushing women's movements underground.

Because the political structure affords minimal opportunities for women's movements (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010), public debates on women's issues have shifted to digital platforms, creating a substitute public sphere. Iranian women's considerable social media presence has transformed these platforms into battlegrounds for resistance, with feminists appropriating them as alternative movement media. Online campaigns highlighted long-term women's rights struggles while reshaping protest performances and forms of participation (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017).

In this article, I examine how Iranian feminist activists strategically appropriate mediation opportunities offered by digital platforms to perform resistance, circulate feminist counter-narratives, and reshape public discourse under Iran's restrictive political structure. I begin with a familiar observation: the same visibility that enables this activism becomes an ambivalent terrain that simultaneously exposes activists to vulnerabilities (Clark-Parsons, 2021), including state surveillance, misogynistic backlash, and geopolitical co-optation. I explore how digital feminist protest repertoires acquire media-spectacle status in authoritarian contexts that systematically constrain feminist activism. I engage critically with Bart Cammaerts's (2012, 2018) *mediation opportunity structure* to extend this framework beyond its original liberal democratic, "Western" contexts to capture how mediation opportunities operate in authoritarian settings.

Through a comparative frame analysis of key digital/hybrid campaigns between 2017 and 2022, informed by sustained digital ethnography, I trace how activists navigate these tensions across hybrid media environments, staging and bearing witness to the systemic precaritization of female embodiment (Butler, 2016). Here, embodied vulnerability is enacted as a performative mode of political resistance, connecting different forms of gender-based violence. I argue that embodied vulnerability becomes both a constraint and an opportunity in an authoritarian context, simultaneously enabling and limiting feminist activism—a dynamic central to understanding how activists strategically confront the contradictions of digital visibility.

De-Westernizing Mediation Opportunity Structure

This research proposes a rethinking of Cammaerts's (2012, 2018) mediation opportunity structure framework to capture how digital affordances are appropriated for feminist political contestation in politically restrictive environments. Critically engaging with this framework's triad of interrelated opportunities—media, discursive, and networked—I analyze how activists navigate the affordances (boyd, 2010) and constraints of digital media. The media opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012) informs my analysis of how feminist campaigns are framed in established media coverage and how activists seek visibility and resonance in broader media discourse. I draw on the discursive opportunity structure to analyze how activists engage in self-mediation by circulating counter-narratives through digital protest artifacts. I draw on the networked opportunity structure to analyze how activists use digital platforms to mobilize support and coordinate direct action through practices such as counter-surveillance (*sousveillance*) and hashtag activism.

In turn, as Cammaerts (2012) argues, mediation opportunity structures are inseparable from and shaped by what Tarrow (1994) calls political opportunity structures—that is, how the political environment incentivizes or discourages collective action, which conditions whether mediated contestation is afforded or constrained.

Cammaerts's (2012) model was initially advanced to explain protest dynamics in liberal democratic, primarily Western settings that afford broad opportunities for mediated dissent. In the protest scenarios Cammaerts (2012) discusses, there is an implicit understanding between the state and citizens that dissent possesses a degree of legitimacy. Recent scholarship has critically applied Cammaerts's framework to non-Western contexts with greater media and political constraints. Analyzing the Anti-National Education Movement in Hong Kong, Wong and Wright (2020) propose *the hybrid mediation opportunity structure*, emphasizing co-constitutive relations among discursive, media, and networked opportunities. Similarly, Sun and Yin (2024), studying feminist data activism in China, show how the dilemma between seeking visibility and refusing mainstream exposure, under censorship and surveillance, reconfigures the mediation opportunity structure as contingent and adaptive.

Joining this debate, this article situates Cammaerts's framework within the Iranian context, where feminist activism unfolds under authoritarian conditions, and activists navigate a contested media terrain marked by shifting boundaries between resistance and suppression and between visibility and vulnerability. Under these conditions, I argue, activists strategically confront the contradictions of digital visibility by reworking digital platforms as hybrid spaces of resistance, in which visibility itself becomes a site of political struggle, shaped not only by platform affordances but also by the broader political context.

Here, the focus is not simply on showing how protest repertoires are constrained and delegitimized, but on how activists leverage these constraints to enable different potentialities of protest action. Through an analysis of protest repertoires and mediation opportunities across five feminist movements, I argue that the visual, affective invocation of vulnerability can lend these repertoires spectacularizing potential. Drawing on Butler's (2016) conceptualization of vulnerability as performative, I approach these practices not merely as instances of exposure to power but as embodied and mediated enactments of political contestation through which vulnerability becomes a mode of resistance. This dynamic, I argue, operates through two distinct repertoires:

In the first repertoire, the vulnerability of individual protesters to state surveillance and coercion often serves to spectacularize the protest cause, especially if large numbers bear digital witness to these actions. I call this *collective witnessing of individual vulnerability*. This repertoire characterizes three of five campaigns I examine: #GirlsofEnghelabStreet, #BlueGirl, and Our Camera, Our Weapon. I argue that in authoritarian contexts, where opportunities for physical gatherings in large numbers are highly restricted, the physical vulnerabilities offline protesters face can increase the potential of their repertoires to provide a media spectacle.

The second category of protest repertoires, which I call *collective witnessing of collective vulnerability*, encompasses #MeTooIran and Harass-Watch. Our Camera, Our Weapon, as I explain, straddles both categories. This repertoire does not involve physical staging of individual vulnerability and

thus entails less risk to individual activists; rather, it involves collective self-mediation—digital sharing of personal experiences of gendered violence. This repertoire of digital witnessing connects personal experiences to a broader vulnerability framed as affecting women across Iran.

This study is interested in how protesters achieve media spectacle amid the routinization of everyday gendered violence, rather than in forms of resistance during mass insurgency that attract lethal state responses and are readily framed as media spectacle. This focus informs my decision to analyze protest repertoires before the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) uprising of 2022–2023, whose quasi-insurrectionary scale and explicit rejection of state legitimacy (Bayat, 2023) distinguish it from the more limited mobilizations examined in this study.

Gendered Visibility Under Patriarchal Authoritarianism

Despite the opportunities digital media provide, Iranian activists face structural constraints. The state's multilayered digital repression, combining filtering, cyberattacks, Internet throttling, and cybercrime legislation (Alimardani & Milan, 2017), particularly affects feminist activists. This repression operates through informal online harassment and formal security measures, including arrests and imprisonment (IranWire, 2022). These surveillance tactics transcend borders through transnational repression, targeting exiled feminist organizers (Michaelsen, 2018).

The visibility of feminism in digital spaces has triggered backlash, including systematic delegitimization by pro-government media to discourage participation and contain women's activism within conservative frameworks (Mohtashamzadeh, 2022). It has also led to misogynistic and anti-feminist backlash, notably the emergence of an Iranian manosphere, aligned with global alt-right movements (Khosravi-Ooryad, 2023). Mousavi-Niko (2024) shows how Iranian *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW) groups promote misogynistic content shaped by traditional religious values, portraying feminism as a threat to Iranian-Islamic masculinity.

Popular feminism has gained prominence in Iranian digital spaces, particularly among diaspora content creators, paralleling global trends. According to Banet-Weiser (2018), this feminist expression operates within the economy of visibility, where feminist content becomes commodified through platform logics. While contributing to the visibility of feminist issues, it often prioritizes engagement metrics and personal branding. A key constraint in the Iranian context emerges when these discourses emphasize individual empowerment over structural critique, depoliticizing collective struggles (Ravadrad & Shamsi, 2022). Furthermore, this mode of activism amplifies privileged voices outside Iran, overshadowing grassroots movements (Khosravi-Ooryad, 2024). Tafakori (2021) frames popular feminism in Iranian digital campaigns as "Janus-faced," demonstrating how these movements employ a visual language of individual self-branding that, while building collective solidarity, aligns with neoliberal frameworks (p. 64).

A further constraint emerges from transnational media framing of Iranian feminist campaigns: as Mohtashamzadeh (2022) highlights, increased visibility of these campaigns allowed political and media actors, including international outlets, to appropriate and reframe them to fit their agendas. Scholars

critique such framings for portraying Iranian women as passive victims, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes, and oversimplifying their activism (Hashemi, 2018; Shahrokni & Sofos, 2022; Tafakori, 2020). Shaban (2022) identifies how selective narratives in Western media reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes and femonationalist agendas.

As activists navigate these constraints, I argue, a complex dynamic emerges across Iranian feminist campaigns. Activists engage with platform affordances to gain visibility and challenge gendered power relations. Yet the same platforms also generate significant vulnerabilities intertwined with authoritarian forms of surveillance, discipline, delegitimization, and appropriation. This tension sits at the core of digital feminist activism in Iran, where visibility is not simply a form of empowerment, but a contested, precariously embodied condition. As I demonstrate below, however, this precariousness, when staged, witnessed, and documented in its systematicity, represents both a constraint and a mediation opportunity.

Mapping Through Digital Ethnography and Frame Analysis

My research dates to December 2017, when I was first struck by the capacity of Iranian women's protests on digital platforms to address structural inequalities and resist everyday gendered oppression, particularly around compulsory hijab. Exploratory archiving of digital material gradually evolved into systematically monitoring gender-related discussions on various digital platforms through August 2022.

The study subjects were "mobile and multiply situated" (Marcus, 1995, p. 102), encompassing activists' practices, digital materials across platforms and spaces, and the mediation of their activism. Following Clark (2016), this study defines activism broadly to include both sustained commitment and episodic discursive activism, recognizing that digital witnessing and collective storytelling constitute forms of political participation. Between 2017 and 2022, I conducted sustained ethnographic engagement across platforms popular in Iran, key feminist websites, campaigns and tools, and media coverage of these hybrid campaigns, gradually constructing an ethnographic corpus.² The main method employed was mobile, multisited ethnography (Postill & Pink, 2012) to map the field, following Marcus's (1995) tracking strategies: following activists and their followers, tracking the circulation of material objects and artifacts, as well as paths, threads, connections, and relationships within and across feminist campaigns.

As I developed questions about the mediation opportunity structure framework's applicability in authoritarian contexts, I decided that identifying patterns across several campaigns within the same political environment would offer richer insights. Accordingly, I adopted comparative frame analysis to identify similar and differing patterns in five campaigns' engagement with their respective opportunity structures: #GirlsofEnghelabStreet, #BlueGirl, #MeTooIran, Harass-Watch, and Our Camera, Our Weapon. These cases were selected for their popularity, visibility, and capacity to illustrate different aspects of (digital) feminist

² The corpus comprised 38 Instagram profiles of high-visibility feminist activists and collectives, inside Iran and in the diaspora; 19 feminist Telegram channels; Twitter/X monitoring of trending hashtags; 10 feminist websites, and 12 online petitions on Karzar.net and Change.org. Media coverage spanned 17 international, 44 Persian-language international media, 30 diaspora, and 69 domestic outlets.

resistance, and analyzed to examine how meanings were constructed, negotiated, and contested around feminist campaigns over time.

Following Snow's (2004) conceptualization of framing as an ongoing interpretive process rather than a fixed set of categories, frames were traced through iterative engagement with campaign-related materials across platforms, informed by long-term digital ethnographic observation. This approach allowed attention to how feminists, alongside state and media actors, articulated competing meanings in relation to shared political and media constraints. Situating framing practices within these conditions highlights how frames emerged through interaction with, and in response to, the mediation and political opportunity structures (Benford & Snow, 2000), shaping visibility, resonance, and risk.

My research corpus consisted solely of public content. Although accessibility does not negate users' privacy expectations (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), the field's fluidity and mobility precluded obtaining informed consent from participants. Recognizing the problematic nature of covert observation, I implemented several protective measures, including anonymizing participants' information, especially for those inside Iran; excluding sensitive information; paraphrasing digital content to prevent identification via search engines; and blurring faces in digital images.

Digital Feminist Protest Repertoires in Iran

I examine key cases of digital/hybrid feminist activism in Iran (2017–2022). My focus remains on protest movements in an everyday, noninsurrectionary context. These cases represent various campaign strategies, in terms of digital tactics and protest repertoires, demonstrating how activists navigate political constraints in online and offline spaces by appropriating the mediation opportunities of digital platforms. This dynamic unfolds through two main repertoires:

Individual Vulnerability, Collective Witnessing

The first category of protests begins with a single protester in physical space, representing an individual sufferer of injustice with whom thousands, who feel unable to take the risks of protesting, can identify. This often generates a media spectacle sustained by thousands who digitally bear witness. I call this repertoire the collective witnessing of individual vulnerability:

#GirlsofEnghelabStreet: Spectacularizing Embodied Vulnerability

#GirlsofEnghelabStreet represents a critical moment in the ongoing struggle against compulsory hijab, exemplifying the entanglement between online and offline spaces in feminist activism and between embodied vulnerability and its digital witnessing. On December 27, 2017, Vida Movahed stood on a utility box on Tehran's iconic Enghelab (Revolution) Street, waving her white headscarf as a protest flag. Her arrest by the "morality police" sparked the #WhereIsShe tweetstorm, inspiring several women, later known as #GirlsofEnghelabStreet, to stage similar protests in January and February 2018. Their performances circulated rapidly online, triggering public attention and intense debates about the hijab.

This novel protest form linked the legacy of anti-compulsory-hijab resistance since the 1979 Revolution to recent anti-mandatory-hijab digital campaigns. Occupying physical public spaces associated with the 1979 Revolution—namely, Enghelab Street—to challenge patriarchal control over women’s bodies, these embodied performances gained unprecedented online visibility. Women’s evident vulnerability to arrest or assault contributed to extensive national and international media coverage. Each protest made injustice and resistance to that injustice starkly visible, calling on people to bear witness.

The potential of these performances for visual mediation was key to their extensive digital witnessing, particularly in the case of Vida, whose protest was repeatedly reposted as a still image from a mobile video that framed her as heroically isolated. In subsequent digital remediations, the image was edited to remove spectators and surroundings (Figure 1³), reinforcing the lone heroine frame and transforming Vida’s protest into an “image event” (Cammaerts & Jiménez-Martínez, 2014).



Figure 1. Digital remediation of Vida’s performance (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

The discursive opportunity, the injustice framing, and the networked opportunity—digital remediation of the protests—drew on the protesters’ embodied vulnerability in the face of repression, rendering this exposure an affordance rather than a constraint. However, feminist activists had to navigate a complex media opportunity structure: Pro-government media outlets crafted narratives to discredit protesters’ framing, presenting the campaign as a subversive Western anti-Islamic project by counterrevolutionaries, opposition abroad, and “the criminal USA” and “Zionist regime” (Raja News, 2018, para. 11). In this conspiracy narrative, participants were labeled deceived women, political prostitutes, puppets of the counter-revolution, national traitors, and foreign agents (Asr-Iran, 2018).

State media drew parallels with historic foreign interventions, such as the 1953 CIA-backed coup, framing the protests as a plot that used paid protesters. They further sought to delegitimize the movement

³ Figures 1, 4, and 6 are publicly circulated online images; source-identifying details are withheld for ethical reasons.

by labeling its participants as pro-sanctions traitors (e.g., Taleghani, 2018). Sanctions that Trump had repeatedly threatened to reimpose on Iran in 2017 were implemented in 2018, after the Girls' protests.

The demand for freedom of dress was framed as superficial compared with more significant issues, such as women's social status and eligibility for the presidency. This delegitimation framing created a dichotomy between girls deemed careless and disconnected from societal issues and true revolutionary girls committed to family livelihoods and Islamic values (e.g., Elyaszadeh, 2018). The symbolic association of #GirlsofEnghelabStreet with spaces and events of the 1979 Revolution seemed to unsettle conservatives, prompting efforts to reclaim the label *Girls of Enghelab*: Sobh-e-No newspaper (2018) used the term to refer to female futsal champions (see Figure 2). It was also used for participants of an official gathering to honor Hijab and Chastity Day (Mashregh News, 2019b; Figure 3).



Figure 2. Front page of Sobh-e-No. Source: Sobh-e-No (2018).



Figure 3. "We are real GirlsofEnghelabStreet!" (Mashregh News, 2019b).

Reformist media within Iran adopted a more empathetic approach toward the girls, deploying a milder version of the campaigners' injustice frame, describing them as "protesting girls" suffering from gender discrimination (Jamaran News, 2018). They questioned the necessity of hijab enforcement, suggesting a better introduction of hijab and Islam rather than confrontation (Ahmadi, 2018).

Iranian media outlets abroad amplified feminist injustice framings, presenting protesters as brave women and symbols of justice-seeking activism. Framed as a legitimate protest movement and nonviolent civil disobedience, protests were described as opening a new chapter in Iranian women's history (e.g., BBC Persian, 2018; Monafzadeh, 2018). Extensive international media coverage of the campaign (e.g., Dehghan, 2018; Middle East Eye, 2018) prompted Human Rights Watch to urge Iran to stop prosecuting women for peaceful protests against compulsory hijab. Transnational media coverage brought both constraints and opportunities. While this coverage allowed conservative outlets inside Iran to intensify accusations of foreign interference, it also amplified protesters' attempts to furnish a counter-narrative through their networked opportunities.

A pivotal mediated moment occurred on February 25, 2018, when police pushed Maryam Shariatmadari, a protester, off an electricity box, injuring her. This incident, captured by pedestrians and shared online (Figure 4), exemplified bottom-up citizen surveillance that disrupted conservatives' criminalizing narrative and reframed participants as victims of police violence (Tabnak, 2018).



Figure 4. Remediated footage of violence against #GirlsofEnghelabStreet (personal communication, February 25, 2018).

#GirlsofEnghelabStreet shows how individual, vulnerably embodied acts of protest are transformed through digital mediation, extending from physical to digital spaces, creating interconnected sites of visibility. Such protests depended on widespread digital witnessing to become media spectacles. The campaign's hybrid character was therefore crucial to its success, enabling the vulnerable body to function as both a material and symbolic site of resistance (Tafakori, 2021). These embodied and visually striking acts of defiance performed a reclamation of public space and challenged state-imposed gender narratives (Ganjeh, 2022). While the contentious nature of mandatory hijab in Iran provided the spark, the campaign's strategic use of digital platforms turned localized acts of resistance into globally visible protests.

#BlueGirl: Between Geopolitical Appropriation and Collective Witnessing

On September 9, 2019, Sahar Khodayari, a young Iranian football fan, set herself on fire outside a courthouse after receiving a prison sentence for trying to enter a football stadium disguised as a man, defying the national ban on women's sports attendance. Sahar's tragic death sparked significant digital media responses among feminist activists. She was quickly dubbed the Blue Girl, after her favorite team's color, Esteghlal. The Farsi hashtags *#دخترآبی* (*#dokhtarabi*/*#BlueGirl*) and *#BanIRSportsFederations* trended on Twitter, with over 16,000 tweets following Sahar's death (Abtahi et al., 2022), calling for the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) to ban Iranian sports federations until women gain access to stadiums.

Sahar's death did not appear to be a straightforward result of the state's gendered violence, but digital witnesses to her protest framed the state as responsible. Supporters framed her death as a protest against gendered injustice. In this framing, Sahar's act of self-immolation foregrounded her preexisting bodily vulnerability, linking it by implication to the structural violence of state-enforced gendered segregation and exclusion from public spaces. I situate the mobilization around Sahar's death as part of activists' periodic endeavor to spectacularize everyday gendered violence. By focusing on feminist activists' practices of collective witnessing, I diverge from the approach of Shahrokni and Sofos (2022), who emphasize the appropriation of Sahar's death for a colonial "politics of pity" in which Iranian women figure as powerless victims, objects of Western savior narratives (p. 206).

The transition from networked to media opportunity was rapid. Protesters' digital witnessing practices grabbed mainstream media attention, extending even to coverage of Sahar's security-controlled nighttime burial. Reactions from politicians, athletes, and public figures, nationally and internationally, transformed the local tragedy into an international controversy. State/pro-state media, particularly national television, attributed Sahar's self-immolation to mental health problems and framed it as a "staged killing" like the death of Neda Agha-Soltan (IRIB, 2019), who was in fact shot by state security forces during the 2009 Green Movement. Officials characterized media reports around her death as spreading rumors for the benefit of foreign enemies and a Western-led intervention project, using this to justify increased control over digital media. Pro-government outlets attacked women's rights activists for supporting "national enemies" when the nation faced renewed economic sanctions (Fars News Agency, 2019).

International politicians and media, especially in the United States, depicted Sahar as another victim of the regime and expressed support for the struggle of the Iranian people against the repressive government (VOA, 2019b; Figure 5). These framings emerged amid heightened U.S.-Iran tensions, with the *#BlueGirl* case entangled in broader geopolitical narratives. Iranian opposition forces used the incident to argue against negotiating with the regime over the nuclear deal (VOA, 2019a). However, these competing framings were countered by feminist activists who positioned Sahar's story within women's rights struggles.



Figure 5. #BlueGirl at a U.S. State Department briefing (VOA, 2019a).

One month later, in October 2019, women were officially allowed into stadiums for the first time in 40 years, following decades of feminist contestation. Men initiated solidarity hashtags, such as *#با من به ورزشگاه بیا* (Come_to_Stadium_with_Me), building on the earlier boycott campaign, *#تا نیاد نمی‌رم* (Won't_Go_Until_She_Goes). During this historic match, digital and physical spaces were combined by activists to transform Sahar's image into an icon of resistance, connecting it to the history of unfulfilled women's rights. Leveraging digital visual affordances, spectators shared stadium images of Sahar and memorial placards on Twitter (see Figure 6), reclaiming the stadium as a commemorative space.⁴



**Figure 6. Left: "This place is booked for #BlueGirl!"
Right: "#BlueGirl is missed here!" (personal communication, October 10, 2019).**

#BlueGirl represents an instance of hybrid feminist activism in a restrictive political environment. Appropriating digital affordances, particularly through strategic visual storytelling, activists transformed a seemingly personal tragedy into a narrative challenging systemic gender inequalities and, as Abtahi et al.

⁴Translations from Persian are by the author.

(2022) demonstrate, into a space for processing collective grief and outrage. They created resonant symbols of resistance, connecting them to women's historical struggles. Over time, digital mobilization shifted from immediate demands for justice to symbolic commemoration. Activists leveraged transnational networks to create an international media spectacle, generating global solidarity and reframing local struggles as universal human rights issues. Through the continual interplay of networked, discursive, and media opportunity structures, protest narratives surrounding #BlueGirl contributed to a temporary policy shift allowing women's attendance at stadiums. Although this success was brief and partly achieved under FIFA pressure, protesters' injustice framing, grounded in the witnessing of an image-event centered on embodied vulnerability, enacted a precarious triumph over the state securitarian framings.

Collective Vulnerability, Collective Witnessing

The second category of campaigns centers on collective witnessing of collective vulnerability to everyday gendered violence, rather than bearing witness to iconic individual vulnerable bodies. These campaigns feature collective practices of (digital) self-mediation and self-witnessing, turning the everyday nature of sexual violence and harassment into a media spectacle, framed not as routine, but as an injustice requiring urgent action. In this repertoire, the act of online witnessing stages gendered vulnerability as both personal and collective (Clark-Parsons, 2021):

#MeTooIran: Denormalizing Gendered Vulnerability

#MeTooIran exemplifies "hybrid activism" (Wong & Wright, 2020) that leveraged diverse media and narrative forms to address normalized sexual violence. The campaign created expansive mediation opportunities, largely because although sexual harassment initially appeared unrelated to the state, it became apparent that women's collective witnessing of everyday harassment exposed systemic gendered violence embedded in the sociopolitical order.

#MeTooIran gained momentum in summer 2020 when users began sharing personal accounts of sexual harassment using the Twitter trending hashtag #تجاوز (#rape). From individual narratives of abuse in private and public spaces, the campaign soon evolved into collective testimonies against several Iranian public figures, including artists, journalists, academics, and officials. One defining moment occurred when female journalists released multimedia content on Instagram on National Journalists' Day (August 8, 2020), documenting workplace sexual harassment, which went viral.

In September 2020, Keyvan Emamverdi, a former bookshop owner, was accused of drugging and sexually assaulting dozens of women. Survivors' digital testimonies prompted extensive media coverage, with most outlets supporting legal action (e.g., Hamshahri-Online, 2020) and feminist lawyers and websites, such as BidarZani, serving as key sources. However, conservative media like Mashregh News (2022a) portrayed Emamverdi as a "predator from the intellectual community," linking his assaults to the supposedly loose sexual morals of the social milieu and its demands for civil liberties and women's rights (para. 20). In court, Emamverdi claimed he was targeted by the MeToo movement, backed by "hostile media." Here, conservatives focused on seeking exemplary justice for victims through the death penalty, while survivors supported a custodial sentence and restorative justice.

The movement exposed similar patterns in cases involving prominent figures: Aydin Aghdashloo, a renowned painter; Kamil Ahmadi, a sociologist researching women's and minority issues; and Mohsen Namjoo, an Iranian singer residing in the U.S. Digital testimonies drew international coverage of Aghdashloo (The New York Times, 2020) and Ahmadi's case (The Guardian, 2021). In turn, international coverage amplified discussions on digital platforms and domestic and diaspora media.

Crucially, the accused's political distance from conservatives and the state rendered the campaign a media spectacle across pro-state media. The accused, mainly "intellectuals" and cultural workers, could be depicted as Westernized "liberals" and "radicals." Yet cracks soon emerged in the conservative framing that highlighted the loose morals of radical intellectual circles. Ahmadi, a Kurdish scholar and former political prisoner, denied the allegations, claiming they were politically motivated by the government. Aghdashloo, labeled Iran's Harvey Weinstein (Fassihi, 2020), denied the accusations, yet his artworks continued selling at prestigious Tehran auctions, raising questions about state-linked networks shielding him.

More significantly, the discursive opportunity structure of the movement itself, across multiple platforms, enabled dynamics of women's self-education beyond shared storytelling, addressing the lack of sex education and the culture of silence and shame (Foomani & Reimer, 2024). Issues such as endemic sexual violence, victim-blaming, and legal gaps emerged as focal points of digital activism, fueling advocacy for the Protection of Women Against Violence Bill. Volunteer initiatives like Harass-Watch and Cheragh-Academy became integrated into the movement, supporting survivors in navigating Iran's discriminatory legal system.

Digital feminist storytelling in #MeTooIran shows how individual testimonies gradually built collective narratives through digital platforms. Clark (2016) argues that hashtags possess a narrative logic that connects individual stories. Traveling across platforms and formats, from text to hashtags, the #MeTooIran hybrid media pattern offered a critical "personal-to-political bridge" (Clark-Parsons, 2021, p. 16) that exposed systemic gendered violence, rendering personal vulnerability visible as shared vulnerability. In Iran's restrictive political and cultural context, the campaign's networked opportunity structure provided a platform for articulating otherwise silenced voices, circumventing media constraints. This sustained circulation of testimonies fostered collective identity and solidarity, with users expressing support, outrage, and a shared sense of responsibility (Amini & Dadgostarnia, 2023).

Women's collective self-visualization as vulnerable subjects, rendered injurable by the system, triggered a systemic backlash: State-aligned forces and supporters of accused individuals reframed personal testimonies as politically motivated attacks, leveraging their media channels to discredit sexual violence allegations. Pro-government media labeled the movement a dangerous political project targeting Iranian artists (Mashregh News, 2022b). This signaled a shift in the political stance of government supporters, who had previously framed "intellectuals" as prone to "loose morals."

The hashtag #rape faced coordinated disinformation, including fake stories and targeted harassment against activists, disrupting the movement (Kermani & Hooman, 2024). #MeTooIran's complex trajectory is shaped by Iran's legal framework, where harsh penal codes deter survivors of sexual violence

from seeking legal recourse (Mincheva & Hooman, 2023). Within feminist circles, the campaign faced criticism for reducing survivors to passive subjects while neglecting systemic sexual violence (Radio-Zamaneh, 2022). From the perspective of this study, however, key to #MeTooIran's transformation into a media spectacle was supporters' collective commitment to developing networked and discursive opportunity structures through which gendered vulnerabilities could be performed not as endemic to femininity but as produced through patriarchal structures of violence.

Harass-Watch: Digital Mapping as Collective Self-Witnessing

Harass-Watch (دیدبان آزار), like #MeTooIran, became a media spectacle through women's collective self-witnessing of gendered vulnerability, grounded in robust networked and discursive opportunities. Unlike #MeTooIran, which centers on personal testimonies, Harass-Watch first appeared as "objective" documentation, a map. Founded in 2018 by Iranian feminist activists, Harass-Watch is a collaborative tool for mapping sexual harassment reports (see Figure 7). This interactive application allows users to mark incidents on a nationwide map and categorize them by form, from verbal harassment to dress policing. It identifies high-risk areas using visual data across cities.



Figure 7. Harass-Watch's mapping interface. Source: Harass-Watch (n.d.).

The platform shows how activists leverage networked opportunities to problematize sexual harassment by making it visible and framing gendered vulnerability as a social issue. Like #MeTooIran, Harass-Watch bridges the personal and the political. By crowdsourcing and visualizing users' stories, it builds solidarity with survivors and highlights the prevalence of harassment. Harass-Watch exemplifies how digital activism creates collective visibility by bringing gendered taboos into public discussion and reframing them through cultural and technological affordances. By facilitating collaborative documentation of harassment and providing a comprehensive view of gender-based violence, it challenges dominant definitions, urging action from authorities and society.

Harass-Watch initially benefited from positive mainstream media framing that presented it as directed toward reforming social behavior rather than confronting the state. Iranian feminist websites (e.g., Meidaan, 2018) and diaspora media (e.g., Radio-Zamaneh, 2018) covered Harass-Watch's launch. National newspapers praised it as a mature initiative against street harassment and a civic effort to reduce

gendered violence (Hemmati, 2018). However, two years later, the national media framing shifted following #MeToo's irruption onto the national political scene in 2020 and conservatives' subsequent securitization of campaigns against sexual violence. Conservative Hawzah-News criticized Harass-Watch as un-Iranian and un-Islamic, linking it to #MeToo, arguing that practices labeled by the platform as sexual violence, including gender segregation and female dormitory restrictions, were safeguards for social morality (Parsa, 2021). This critique revealed anxiety over Harass-Watch linking routine misogynistic violence, framed as social norms, to state policies.

In May 2022, Harass-Watch, alongside #MeTooIran and Cheragh-Academy, was targeted in organized cyberattacks, resulting in temporary inaccessibility (IranWire, 2022). During the WLF uprising, increased targeting of activists disrupted Harass-Watch's operations, forcing key participants into exile and pushing the group to operate mainly from outside Iran (Afghah, 2023). This backlash suggests Harass-Watch did more than document harassment. By bearing witness to gendered vulnerability in one context, it exposed the systematic nature of that vulnerability, denormalizing and spectacularizing vulnerability's function in maintaining gender-based power structures.

Sousveillance as Spectacularization

My final example is Our Camera, Our Weapon (also known as My Camera Is My Weapon), which centers networked grassroots counter-surveillance as its principal repertoire. The campaign combines key features of both categories, bringing together individual embodied vulnerability and collective witnessing. The distinctive feature of the campaign's repertoire is that there is no separation between those who protest their gendered precarity in physical spaces and those who bear witness to it, thereby testifying to women's vulnerability in repressive patriarchal contexts.

The campaign, launched in 2017, encourages Iranian women to record and share encounters with "morality police" and civilian moral guardians enforcing mandatory hijab. Citizens have recorded confrontations over hijab even from inside police vehicles, while videos of public interventions against enforcers frequently appeared online. Promoted by controversial diaspora activist Masih Alinejad, these videos reached established diaspora Persian-language media such as Manoto-TV and Iran-International (both based in London, with large viewership inside Iran), generating outrage over coercive hijab enforcement. The campaign faced criticism from state-affiliated media for discouraging hijab enforcement (e.g., Fars News Agency, 2019).

Significantly, the event that transformed the campaign into a media spectacle had little to do with hijab but drew on the pervasiveness of the state's coercive surveillance of women's bodies. In the "Tehran-Pars Girl" incident (June 2019), a passerby's mobile camera footage captured a plainclothes male officer violently arresting a teenage girl who was splashing water with peers in a park in the Tehran-Pars neighborhood. Although police claimed the arrest was for "unconventional acts violating public morality" (Iran Labor News Agency [ILNA], 2019, para. 2), the video's violence sparked outrage. Shared by Alinejad, the viral footage generated polarized media coverage; reformist outlets criticized the police action as violating religious principles, highlighting the male officer's physical contact with the girl (Lotfi, 2019). Conversely, conservative media like Mashregh News (2019a) defended the use of force, featuring pro-

government UK-based Iranian analyst Ali Alizadeh, who justified the violence by claiming that Western police are far more aggressive in similar situations.

The campaign's popularity complicated its delegitimation framing as a foreign-backed campaign and a risk to national cultural integrity. While Alinejad's campaigns have drawn feminist critique for their neoliberal framing and alignment with U.S. foreign policy (Shaban, 2022; Tafakori, 2021), women inside Iran appropriated sousveillance as a tactic for confronting endemic gendered vulnerability. Beyond witnessing the state's violent enforcement of "proper moral conduct," sousveillance strategies extended to documenting sexual harassment in public spaces; the popular diaspora-based Instagram account *Everyday_Feminism*, unconnected to Alinejad, served as a space for women inside Iran to share videos of street harassment, identifying harassers by capturing their faces, rendering its pervasive nature visible, and questioning its normalization.

Counter-surveillance around hijab enforcement documented incidents, creating a visual archive of institutionalized violence. This networked witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014) intensified public and media debates and amplified collective outrage. Beyond its immediate impact, this tactic challenged not only the legitimacy of the coercive regulation of women's bodies but also the legitimacy of the authoritarian system dependent on the violent production of female vulnerability.

Discussion

I revisit the three dimensions of mediation opportunity structure—media, discursive, and networked—to map how these layers intersect in the Iranian context and show how activists confront the ambivalence of digital visibility, not only navigating the vulnerability associated with visibility under authoritarian constraints but also leveraging this vulnerability to expand mediation opportunities.

Media Opportunity Structure

Activists' strategic appropriation of digital affordances to gain media resonance reveals the interplay between digital practices and mainstream media coverage. Central to this dynamic is how activists navigate media opportunities through protest logic, digital practices, and self-mediation. These strategies facilitate local, national, international, and diaspora media coverage of feminist campaigns, expanding visibility and reshaping public discourse. Media attention, particularly international coverage, often intensifies the visibility of gender issues in digital debates.

This visibility has prompted systematic backlash from state/pro-state media, which craft strategic narratives to delegitimize feminist activism through interconnected strategies of securitization, othering, and devaluation. Through securitization, feminists are consistently framed as foreign-led threats to national integrity. This framing links feminist campaigns to domestic political rivalries and international tensions, including conflicts with imperial powers and exiled opposition groups. For example, *#GirlsofEnghelabStreet* was labeled a counterrevolutionary project, and *#BlueGirl* a staged killing aimed at global attention.

The othering framing portrays activists as disconnected from “authentic” Iranian society and “real” Iranian women. State narratives in #GirlsofEnghelabStreet coverage contrasted true revolutionary girls with those deemed misled or foreign-influenced. Devaluation aimed to discredit feminist claims: #MeTooIran testimonies were dismissed as unverified narratives targeting Iranian national figures, and Harass-Watch was framed as undermining Iranian/Islamic moral values. These strategies delegitimize feminist activism while reinforcing state narratives of authentic national identity.

Despite these constraints, feminists’ staging of gendered vulnerability disrupts official narratives and dominant media frames. In #GirlsofEnghelabStreet, widely circulated videos of police violence reframed protests as legitimate grievances rather than public disorder. Similarly, in #BlueGirl, although state-sponsored media framed her self-immolation as a mental health issue, activists’ visual storytelling reframed it as a symbol of systemic gender discrimination. These cases demonstrate how activists construct counter-narratives that coexist with and contest hegemonic representations even in restricted media environments. Activists, I argue, capitalize on the endemic nature of gendered violence under patriarchal authoritarianism, where highlighting one aspect of patriarchal power reveals the broader structure.

Diaspora media amplified counter-narratives challenging state-led delegitimization, framing feminist demands as legitimate claims, and featuring (diaspora) feminist activists’ voices. Despite state restrictions on diaspora media through Internet filtering and satellite signal jamming, their wide reach suggests potential influence on public discourse. These media help translate local activism into globally resonant frameworks. International coverage, while enhancing global visibility, entangles feminist activism in geopolitical and anti-regime narratives, often overshadowing local feminist agency and objectives.

Networked Opportunity Structure

By strategically navigating hybrid visual and networked affordances to stage and bear witness to gendered vulnerability, feminist campaigners have contested its normalization, transforming it into a media spectacle. Their networked practices manifest in spectacular performances (e.g., #GirlsofEnghelabStreet) that invite remediation across digital media through hashtags and innovative visual documentation (Harass-Watch and sousveillance practices). Visual affordances work with networked circulation practices to transform personal narratives into collective testimonies through sustained content distribution (#MeTooIran).

Networked practices enable collaborative strategies beyond geographical boundaries, revealing dynamics between activists in Iran and the diaspora, transforming localized resistance into globally visible protests that generate solidarity. Activists employ network-enabled archive-building practices, documenting gendered inequality and resistance artifacts to create resonant symbols of resistance (e.g., BlueGirl). These digital archives preserve movement history and sustain collective memory by ensuring independent representation beyond immediate protest moments. Networked affordances enable direct action by disseminating protest materials, supporting feminist mobilization. Activists circulate counter-surveillance and digital witnessing of institutionalized violence, creating public pressure. Innovative digital tools like Harass-Watch enhance these practices. Collectively, these networked strategies increase the visibility of

gendered vulnerability in mainstream discourse, amplifying feminist resistance and creating spaces for collective action.

Discursive Opportunity Structure

This research highlights how activists leverage discursive opportunities to challenge patriarchal discourses, reframing women's issues as social concerns requiring structural change. Through individual and collective witnessing of gendered vulnerability, activists compel recognition of its systemic nature. Digital media serve as platforms for activists' self-mediation, creating spaces to narrate marginalized experiences and circulate alternative narratives.

These practices disrupt dominant delegitimation narratives and challenge the normalization of gender-based violence and inequality, gradually reshaping mainstream representations. In the Iranian context, the discursive opportunity structure reveals a complex strategy of discourse deconstruction and reconstruction, employing tactics such as visual storytelling and collective testimonies that transform individual experiences of gender-based oppression into collective political discourses, expanding the visibility of feminist narratives and struggles.

Final Reflections: Vulnerability as Mediation Opportunity

Building on an archive of Iranian digital feminist activism between 2017 and 2022, this research demonstrates how digital media afford mediation opportunities that Iranian feminists strategically appropriate to circulate feminist injustice frames and reshape public discourse while navigating repression and misogynistic backlash. This dynamic unfolds through the interplay of media, discursive, and networked opportunities, creating what Wong and Wright (2020) describe as the hybrid mediation opportunity structure, where physical and online resistance are connected. In these spaces, online and offline platforms, along with alternative digital and mainstream media, intertwine to produce and circulate counter-narratives through self-mediated digital content.

However, increased visibility through hybrid feminist activism brings constraints, including state surveillance, misogynistic backlash, strategic media delegitimization, dilution of collective politics through popular feminism, and co-optation of feminist narratives by international political and media actors. This tension illustrates the ambivalent dynamics of digital activism, where visibility creates opportunities for solidarity while exposing activists to vulnerability. Activists have strategically leveraged this vulnerability, reshaping public debates even under constraints.

To understand the ambivalence of digital visibility in authoritarian political environments, I argue that it is necessary to de-Westernize the mediation opportunity structure as first proposed by Cammaerts (2012). Building on Sun and Yin (2024) and Wong and Wright (2020), I propose that the protest logics, activist repertoires, and mediation opportunities identified by Cammaerts (2012) need to be reconceived in the context of the Majority World. I have specifically focused on how the gendered character of female citizens' precarity and vulnerability, under a patriarchal authoritarian system, functions as both constraint and opportunity for feminist activists.

This dynamic, I argue, operates through two protest repertoires: in the first category of protests, the systemic vulnerability of protesters renders individual embodied protests potentially impactful on public discourse. Online participants bear witness by circulating images that transform normalized gendered violence into a media spectacle. In this process, vulnerability is not merely represented, but enacted through bodily exposure and mediated visibility, becoming a performative mode of political resistance. In the second category of protests, the opportunity for media spectacle emerges through collective self-mediation rather than the mediation of others' bodily vulnerability. Here, vulnerability is performed through the aggregation of personal testimonies and visual narratives, revealing its systemic nature by linking individual experiences of violence to the patriarchal state. In both repertoires, vulnerability operates not only as a condition imposed by authoritarian power but also as a mediated and performative practice through which feminist political claims become visible and contestable.

Digital feminist activism in Iran is shaped by the interplay of networked and discursive opportunities with state repression, gendered discrimination, and national/transnational media. I argue that visibility in authoritarian contexts is not a straightforward affordance, but a strategic site of struggle—mobilized by feminist activists to challenge systemic inequality, yet co-opted by state actors, anti-feminist networks, and international actors to surveil, contain, or depoliticize feminist resistance. Iranian feminist activists, however, do not merely navigate, but actively shape these conditions by drawing on the systemic features of gendered precarity under patriarchal authoritarianism. This is not to romanticize or downplay the vulnerabilities suffered by activists, but to highlight their agency in centering vulnerability as a protest affordance rather than solely a constraint.

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