Turning Domestic into Political: The Case of Female Self-immolation in Iran

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In 2019, Sahar Khodayari set herself on fire outside of an Iranian courtroom after reportedly being informed that she would be imprisoned after her illegal attempt to enter a football stadium, where women have not been allowed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Fassihi 2019). Her self-immolation and death sparked a wave of (inter)national protest and empathy, resulting in the topic of the female stadium ban entering the political agenda (ibid.). A lot more prevalent in Iran, however, is the phenomenon of women's self-immolation inside the home. In fact, in contrast to Western countries, self-immolation (SI) is one of the most common suicide methods in Iran, with women, mostly rural and married, accounting for 70% of all SIs, mostly undergone in their homes (Parvareh et al. 2018). Despite this reality, no similar (inter-)national attention seems to have been gathered to this phenomenon. Recognising the implications of these acts on the human security of women as well as the transformative political power of acts like Sahar's, this paper answers the following questions: to what extent can the phenomena of women's self-immolation in Iran be seen as a form of political expression? How may the study of this phenomenon further inform the human security project of the "protection and empowerment" of women in Iran? Such questions contribute to the existing scholarship on human security by analysing that of Iranian women who resort to self-immolation, as well as to scholarship on gender and the Middle East by sharing its central concern with the deconstruction of the stereotypical depiction of Muslim women as passive and subordinate (Charrad 2011: 418).

The next sections are organised as follows: first, the theoretical framework is presented, namely the human security paradigm and the public/private dichotomy that inform the study of female self-immolation in Iran, followed by a methodology section; next, the paper reflects on the socio-political status of women in Iran in support of the importance of politicising phenomena like female SI, particularly for rural women who may not have access to the public sphere in order to communicate their demands; fourth, the causes and motivations identified by women SI survivors are outlined, establishing the factors affecting this groups' well-being and (in)security, and framing self-immolation as "an expression of subordinated agency" (Rasool and Payton 2014). Finally, the paper concludes that the dominance of patriarchal values resulting in family and marital conflict, forced constraint to the home, and uneven improvements to human and women's security across the country are some of the central factors highlighted by SI survivors as reproducing their insecurity and resulting in the choice to self-immolate; however, when subjected to these conditions, women seem to find agency in the act of self-immolation.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper takes on the human security paradigm to explore the insecurities faced by Iranian women who resort to self-immolation. Traditionally, neo-realist constructions of "national" security have considered the state as the "referent object" of security (Marhia 2013: 19). In the past years, however, a shift has been taking place towards an approach which prioritises the security of individuals and communities (idem: 20). Despite its growth in popularity within both scholarly and public policy fields, no single definition or operationalisation of human security has been adopted (Tadjbaksh and Chenoy 2007: 9). This elasticity, in turn, has sparked doubts about the paradigm's analytical and practical utility (idem: 10).

Tadjbaksh and Chenoy (2007: 13) argue that the added value of the human security paradigm lies in the innovative

questions and answers it demands: "security of whom, from what [and] by what means". First, within this paradigm, "the individual has reached the status of a "whole"" whose security is the ultimate goal (ibid.). Moreover, the individual "as the ultimate end" is understood in terms of their "vulnerabilities on the one hand, and [their] capacity to affect change on the other" (ibid.), illustrating the similar dual goals of individual's "protection and empowerment" identified in Hudson (2005: 163). The study of female self-immolation in Iran under this paradigm, this paper argues, opens the perfect avenue through which one can identify their sources of insecurity as well as conceive of Iranian women as agents of change (Tadjbaksh and Chenoy 2007: 13). Second, this paradigm proposes a broadening of what constitute security threats beyond traditional military and violent risks (idem: 14). In fact, the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report (HDR), where the term 'human security' was first coined, presents seven interconnected and non-hierarchical components of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security (UNDP 1994; Tadjbaksh and Chenoy 2007: 16). Third, this framework promotes a shift from use of military violence towards promotion of human and political development as the desired methods through which security is to be ascertained (Tadjbaksh 2005: 28). In essence, "human security is not a concern with weapons [but] a concern with human life and dignity", highlighting the interconnectedness of human security and international development (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007: 23; UNDP 1994). In all, human security gives primacy to the "real-life, everyday experiences of human being[s] and their complex social and economic relations" and is, therefore, especially valuable for the study of self-immolation among Iranian women (Hudson 2005: 163).

The Habermasian public and private sphere dichotomy, understood in this paper as a "spatial, symbolic, [and] rhetorical construct", has been one the most popular frameworks through which feminists have studied gendered forms of oppression (Landes 2003: 28). Historically, the public sphere, depicting the political and "impersonal, institutional world" has been reserved to men, whilst women have continuously been linked to the private, "personal sphere of family and household" (idem: 31). This has been both a practical as well as discursive project where men are associated with power and status and women to relative powerlessness, significantly colonising women's agency (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001: 303). Furthermore, critics have highlighted its Eurocentrism, especially when applied to Middle Eastern social practices (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001). Nevertheless, the (troubling of) public and private dichotomy, this paper contends, may provide important insights into the security of women in Iran and the rejection of portrayals of Muslim women as "helpless, passive victims" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001: 303).

Finally, this paper proposes broadening what is understood by agency by adopting Mahmood's (2001: 203) conceptualisation of agency "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create". Recognising the placement of Iranian women in patriarchal relations and dynamics, it is of utmost importance that one looks for agency in places that have *traditionally* come to be seen as oppressive, like the domestic space.

Methodology

This paper employs a literature review based on desk research of academic articles on women's socio-political status and the phenomenon of female self-immolation in Iran. Google Scholar was the only source used to search and select the literature to be reviewed. The main keywords used during the research procedure were "women Iranian society", "public private sphere in Iran", and "female self-immolation". Literature on Iran was given priority. Nevertheless, articles on self-immolation across the Middle East and the public/private sphere divide in Muslim contexts were also reviewed. Only articles in English and from the year 2000 onwards were reviewed. While researching the presence of the topic of female self-immolation in the media, civil society and international organisations, keywords like "female self-immolation" and "women self-burning" were used. Google and key Iranian human rights organisations' websites such as "Iran Human Rights" and "Centre for Human Rights in Iran" were used. Some limitations of this research involve the lack of the author's full knowledge of influential Iranian civil society and human rights organisations, which might have influenced the ability to find instances of the presence of female self-immolation in local media and other civil society platforms.

Socio-political Status of Women in Iran

The status of women in Iran has suffered tremendous shifts over the last century, largely due to simultaneous

broader political changes (Keddie 2000: 405). Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, major advances in women's rights were achieved, namely the Family Protection Law of 1967, limiting polygamy and establishing similar divorce rules for both men and women. Additionally, female education was expanded, and women started to work in jobs increasingly outside of the domestic sphere (idem: 406). The 1979 "Islamic Revolution" in Iran, however, resulted in a significantly contrasting state of (gender) affairs in the country (Gheissari 2009: 129). Initially, this revolution was characterised by its plural and inclusive values, promoting mobilisation from various classes, ethnicities, genders, and religions (ibid.). Iranian women, who were a major force of resistance during this period, were persuaded to break confinement to their homes and follow new ideals of womanhood as "loyal, politically engaged, and fearless to challenge injustice" (Gheissari 2009: 129; Mahdi 2004: 433). The end of the revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic, however, culminated in a severe crushing of the improvements to women's status achieved in the years predating the revolution, to the detriment of women's education, access to the "public" sphere and general well-being (Mahdi 2004: 434). These advances were met with significant resistance and public protest from women, but only with limited success (idem: 435). The closing of women's organisations and further segregation were nonetheless the ending result of the revolution (ibid.).

Several explanations have been suggested to explain the failure of the women's movement of this period. One, however, deserves special attention: the movement was started by a very limited group of urban, educated, upper-(middle-) class women, focusing on issues that catered to an equally small group of women (Mahdi 2004: 438). Growing awareness of impediments to women's development amongst highly educated women coupled with decreasing restraints to the domestic sphere during the revolution resulted in their strong protest actions in the public sphere (Gheissari 2009: 133-134; Moruzzi and Sadeghi 2006: 28). In the process, the demands of lower-class women from rural areas, such as health and welfare, were virtually ignored, and a cross-class organised coalition of women could not be established (ibid.). In fact, this problem prevails in the contemporary Iranian feminist movement, where those whose confinement to the (patriarchal) home is still a reality have remained underrepresented by the feminist movement at large (Tohidi 2016: 84).

Studies on the status of women in Muslim societies have, for the most part, focused on their subordination resulting from highly segregationally socio-political systems (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001: 303). Scholars have analysed social relations through an emphasis on the public and private dichotomy, which largely equates men with the former and thus represents them as the ones holding power and (political) decision-making, while (Muslim) women's constraint to the latter deems them powerless (ibid.). Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2001), however, argue that the public and private divide lens through which the status of (Muslim) women has been studied may be largely culturally relative (idem: 303-304). Moreover, the Muslim home has been frequently and wrongly treated as "private" and thus relegated to a status of irrelevancy (idem: 311). Critical of this framework, the authors argue that such conclusions provide an incomplete and misunderstood image of the significance this space holds for women as "the locus of important social, economic, and ritual activities" (ibid.).

In line with this, the importance of studying the domestic, and the phenomenon of female self-immolation in particular, is twofold: first, women who resort to self-immolation, while constrained to their homes, may not be able to voice their demands through other (public) methods to the same extent as women from more favourable backgrounds; second, scholars have disregarded the Muslim home as an essential space for (political) action, leaving the political transformative potential of phenomena such as female self-immolation under-theorised. Finally, if it is true that, as Mahdi (2004: 445) argues, the politicisation of women's actions in public (political) spaces by the government and interactions between women's groups and the state have been pivotal in producing change in women's status and well-being in the country, politicising the domestic and opening up the possibility of significant action from within "private" spaces generates yet another vital source of change, and most importantly, one that pays closer attention to those women whose demands and (human) security have remained unnoticed.

Female Self-immolation in Iran: Causes and Motivations behind the Phenomenon

Self-immolation (SI) is defined in this paper as "a deliberate and willing sacrifice of oneself" by means of setting oneself on fire, with or without the use of flammable products (Aghakhani et al. 2021; Ahmadpanah et al. 2018). Although extremely rare in developed countries, in Iran, the second country where the prevalence of this act is the

highest (after India), SI can constitute up to 71% of all completed suicides and 10% of suicide attempts (Ahmadi et al. 2008). Studies have also reported on the gendered character of this phenomenon (ibid; Saadat 2005; Maghsoudi et al. 2004). Rezaeian (2017: 896) notes the existence of a "geographical belt of self-immolation" crossing Asian countries from Iraq to Bangladesh, with particular incidence over young illiterate married women who "still suffer from having a secondary role in patriarchal societies". In all, while the typical self-immolator in higher-income countries is old, male and with substance abuse issues, in lower-income countries like Iran, the profile of the self-immolator tends to be the rural, married, young and unemployed woman (Cleary et al. 2021: 26).

This section outlines the causes and motivations behind the phenomenon of female SI identified by the literature. The causes identified will be pivotal in clarifying the factors producing this group's (in)security and how to best tackle these. The motivations identified by survivors will provide a window through which we can start to see female SI as political claims and manifestations of subordinated forms of agency (Rasool and Payton 2014). Together, both aspects inform the human security project of "protection and empowerment" of Iranian women who resort to self-immolation and women in Iran at large.

Causes Contributing to the Choice of Self-immolation

Literature on the topic identifies conflicts within the family as one of the primary causes behind female self-immolation in Iran (Khankeh et al. 2015; Rezaie et al. 2014). The highly patriarchal society in which these women live is one in which men (fathers and husbands) hold unmeasurable power over girls' lives, choices about their future, education and marriage whilst fully ignoring women's own desires and triggering family conflicts (Boostani et al. 2013: 3158). In this context, numerous claims like "nobody cared what I have to say" seem to indicate that the feeling of being continuously disregarded and ignored culminates in the choice to self-immolate (Aghakhani et al. 2021). Such feelings are heightened by practices such as arranged marriages, even more so in rural areas, that, in turn, seem to be a great source of hindrance to women's mental health (ibid; Boostani et al. 2013; Khankeh et al. 2015).

Marital conflicts, usually escalating to domestic violence, are also found to be an "unquestionable reality" in the lives of these women and a central reason for their choice to self-immolate (Boostani et al. 2013: 3158). Traditionally, (arranged) marriages, sometimes with significant age differences, come with increasing burdens on women: they are expected to move in with the husbands' (extended) family in, many times, overcrowded places and take on most of the household responsibilities (Khakeh et al. 2015; Boostani et al. 2013: 3159-3160). All these changes contribute to declining mental health and the final choice of SI. Furthermore, the stigma around divorce makes it nearly impossible to abandon these detrimental conditions, at least not without its own consequences (idem: 3158). In the end, self-immolation is perceived by women as the only way to escape their marriage (ibid.).

Economic hardships and frustrations are another contributing cause towards this phenomenon (Boostani et al. 2013: 3158). These are particularly highlighted by Kurdish women in Iran, who are, for the most part, unemployed, contributing to increased insecurity (Lebni et al. 2019). Nevertheless, frustration with one's own economic status is recorded in other regions alike (Boostani et al. 2013: 3158). Modernisation introduced significant changes to life in the country; expansion of education and infrastructure led to large economic improvements, mainly in urban spaces (idem: 3159). However, this brought about changing expectations and wishes in the lives of rural people, and as a result, coping with their monotone, constraining lives has become increasingly harder (ibid.; Lebni et al. 2019). Once again, feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness seem to take dominance and eventually lead to the choice to self-immolate (ibid.). On a similar note, the expansion of communication technologies has led to growing awareness of modern gender values in rural areas, resulting in women comparing their condition to that of upper-class women in urban contexts (ibid.). Growing awareness of women's rights improvements and changing norms in the country, generally not available to lower-class rural women, makes it harder for them to tolerate and cope with the violence and control they experience in their relationships (Boostani et al. 2013: 3159). Here, improvements in some women's security seem to contribute to others' insecurity.

The causes outlined above paint a picture of women's condition of human (in)security in Iran. The marginal status within patriarchal familial and marital relationships and the constraint to the home seem to be at the centre of women's narratives. Perhaps the most important finding, however, is that advances to women's socio-economic

status and security, mainly at the urban level, seem to indirectly contribute to the insecurity of SI survivors. This suggests that uneven development may directly affect the security of those who cannot benefit from such improvements. Furthermore, this case clearly proves the inadequacy of national security approaches in identifying insecurities such as the ones faced by SI survivors in Iran and that the human security paradigm's primacy over the individual is more necessary than ever. In line with this, proposed solutions to tackle the issue of female SI in Iran must go beyond the (necessary but not sufficient) improvement of mental health provision, as studies tend to highlight (Aghakhani et al. 2021; Saadati et al. 2019), and instead tackle all seven aspects of individual's human security identified by the UNDP, with focus on the curbing of patriarchal values' dominance in (rural) Iran. Finally, findings suggest that SI survivors experience heightened insecurities when it comes to social reintegration, and therefore, solutions must equally be directed towards decreasing the incidence of these phenomena (Aghakhani et al. 2021). However, and taking into consideration common narratives such as "no one cared about what I said" amongst survivors, perhaps equally important at this point is to attempt to see SI as a way through which some women communicate their grievances and (political) demands. This is the matter of the next subsection.

Motivations behind and Reasons for the Choice of Self-immolation

Putting an end to suffering is one of the motives identified in the narratives of SI survivors (Rezaie et al. 2014: 324). For some, the lethality of the method was the primary reason for its choice; in the words of a survivor, "If I wanted to get attention […] I would choose an easier way" (ibid.).

Interestingly, however, findings suggest that self-immolation as a form of threat, emancipation and protest seem to be more common motivations behind women's choice of this method. As a threat, SI constitutes a strategy women use to control their environment, and by showcasing their desperation, they expect to chock the people around them and produce change (Khankeh et al. 2015). Thus, survivors may not actually want to die and tend instead to refer to their self-immolation attempt as a way to achieve some sort of change from their condition (Rezaie et al. 2014). Inducing guilt amongst family members through SI was described by survivors as a way to "have freedom to pursue their dreams" (Aghakhani et al. 2021: 24). In fact, a survivor referred to threats to self-burn as "a powerful weapon for women" (Rezaie et al. 2014). Another considered SI to be "the final means of expression for women", one that is capable of inciting compassion towards one's extreme suffering and obtaining the so-desired emancipation that may otherwise be hard to achieve (Khankeh et al. 2015). For others, SI was seen as the perfect way to protest their condition, given its expressive and dramatic character (Lebni et al. 2019). A Kurdish SI survivor in Iran declared that while pondering on how to kill herself, she "went to the worst way" to "tell everyone that we Kurd women have […] difficult conditions" (ibid.).

One of the guiding objectives of scholarship on gender in the Middle East of the past decades has been to deconstruct the stereotypical image of the "silent, passive, subordinate, victimised, and powerless Muslim woman" (Charrad 2011: 418). Two interconnected themes have emerged: first, patriarchal values and structures continue to dominate in the Middle East (also illustrated in the previous subsection); simultaneously, however, scholars have recognised that women consistently and creatively challenge these structures, "developing alternate institutions and practices either collectively or individually in their daily lives" (idem: 427; Mahmood 2001). Findings on the study of female SI in Iran suggest that, indeed, there seems to be significant cultural embeddedness or "cultural identification" behind the choice to self-immolate (Khankeh et al. 2015; Rezaie et al. 2014). Imitation is seen to play a pivotal role in determining someone's choice to self-immolate, and a history of self-immolation among close relatives or community tends to be mentioned by survivors as one of the reasons they chose this method (Rezaie et al. 2014; Lebni et al. 2019). This "copycat" pattern, in turn, establishes a cultural identification behind this method; women who are seen to face similar problems end up choosing similar ways to fix these problems, in this case, by resorting to SI (Rezaie et al. 2014). Additionally, constraint to the (patriarchal) home, which is a common condition for SI survivors, makes fire rather accessible to this group, contributing to the choice of this method (Khankeh et al. 2015). With time, this has created a cultural acceptability of this method, one that, as mentioned before, elicits empathy and recognition towards (future) victims (ibid.).

Narratives like the ones outlined above indicate that self-immolation can be seen as an (extreme) act of taking over one's own life and future. Furthermore, this assertively denies the idea that constraint to the home is synonymous

with loss of agency. Common narratives such as "no one cared about what I said" mentioned by survivors as predecessors/causes for the choice of SI serve to highlight yet again the desire to be heard, one that is so extreme that it literally comes to be embodied in the final act of self-burning. Lacking other means to (politically) protest their situation, rural women in Iran are subject to a patriarchal social order, and it can be argued that they find agency in the act of self-burning. Consequently, the phenomena of female SI in Iran, this paper argues, seems to constitute a textbook display of a collective transgression of conservative gender norms that have traditionally bound women to the status of passive observers in opposition to active national actors.

Some honourable studies have brought attention to the phenomenon of self-immolation as "a communicative act […] which functions as an expression of subordinated agency" in Iraq (Rasool and Payton 2014) or as "symbolic, affective, and necropolitical agency […] a form of political protest" in the Persian Belt countries in general (Hassani 2022). Nonetheless, in general, female SI has mostly been studied from within the field of the medical sciences, leading to a prevalence of epidemiological discourse on the theorising of this phenomenon (ibid.) and thus obscuring its political motivations and implications. Additionally, and as far as this paper is concerned, a similar depoliticising of this phenomenon is taking place in the context of (Iranian) civil society and public policy, signalled by its almost total absence in these contexts. This is particularly true for self-immolations undergone in the domestic sphere. Contrastingly to cases of self-immolation such as Sahar Khodayari's, and to the best of the author's knowledge, no similar attention (national or international) has been gathered to domestic female self-immolation despite its widespread occurrence in Iran. On suicide prevention, the World Health Organization (WHO: 3) highlights the positive effect of the media's stories of people who overcome difficulties following suicidal attempts. In the case of female SI in Iran, the effect and significance of media reporting, this paper argues, would be twofold: on the one hand, it can aid in decreasing its prevalence in the region and thus avoid the increasing insecurities faced by survivors; most importantly, however, it may garner the necessary attention to the particular insecurities faced by rural women whilst depicting them as powerful national political actors.

Conclusion

This paper provided an analysis of the phenomenon of female self-immolation in Iran. In all, it was found that self-immolation constitutes a communicative method of protest through which mostly rural women in Iran, subjected to a patriarchal social order, are able to make political demands in an attempt to effect changes to their status. Integrated in the human security paradigm's mission of "protection and empowerment" of individuals, this paper found the main causes put forward by SI survivors as contributing to their insecurity to be the dominance of patriarchal values, which in turn leads to decreasing personal and economic well-being and discontent, culminating in the choice to self-immolate. Moreover, and perhaps the most noteworthy insight into the factors behind SI survivors' insecurity is that improvements in women's well-being at the urban level appear to amplify the insecurities of those who cannot afford such advancements, namely rural women.

Answering the questions "security from what" and "security by what means" in the context of female SI in Iran demands an overarching approach that gives primacy to all seven aspects of individual well-being put forward by the UNPD, aimed at the demotion of patriarchal values in Iran, whilst simultaneously fighting stereotypes of Muslim women's passiveness. Recognising the Western (neo-colonial) legacy in the Middle East may constitute a sensitive and difficult task if promoted by international organisations like the UN. Furthermore, solutions from within may constitute just an equally challenging project. On a positive note, however, if anything can be learnt from Iran's history of the past century, it is that gender roles have successfully been politicised and transformed before, namely during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, where women were a powerful force of resistance, and their participation in the "public" sphere was actively encouraged.

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