

such abuses are regarded as further sources of shame for the families and communities of the women concerned.⁷⁶

Sexual abuse in custody is not permitted by the law, but laws creating the legal pretext for detention create the situation in which citizens are made vulnerable to illegal abuse. Political protests, and the laws regulating protest via limitations on speech and on civil society, are not generally seen as “gender issues,” but it is increasingly clear that the genders of protesters, and the state’s exploitation of vulnerabilities related to gender and sexuality, are important elements of mobilization, discourse, and repression.

Conclusion

It is commonplace to note that states use the tools of law to bolster and to exercise the power of the regime; what is notable in the context of political protest is the degree to which the texts of the law are pretexts for an extralegal exercise of power that draws heavily on gender and sexuality for its ability to intimidate and to punish. We might draw a comparison here to some of the ways that gender operates in the arena of criminal law, with the text of the law serving in part as a departure point for establishing state toleration of social practices or signalling the regulation of those to various audiences of the law. Law and political power are each not fully comprehensible without the other, and while the state dominates the legal arena, it does not do so with full autonomy from its own society. There are rich opportunities here for future research investigating the ways in which gender (and sexuality) underlies the use of power within and against the law – by the state and by its opponents – in arenas of politics that have not traditionally been addressed in studies of gender and politics.

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“WE DON’T HAVE CITIZENSHIP:” LIBERATION AND OTHER CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING IRANIAN WOMEN’S ACTIVISM IN THE MENA AND BEYOND⁷⁷

By Shirin Saeidi

During my research and conversations with Iranians, I am often questioned on my research interest in citizenship. Iranians from a variety of political backgrounds argue that there is no such thing as citizenship (*shahrvandi*) in Iran. I typically respond by highlighting that many different conceptualizations of citizenship exist and that although these are limited, the Islamic Republic still has Republican elements. However, what if the intervention of my interlocutors—the assertion that “we don’t have citizenship”—is not actually about the presence or absence of citizenship? What if both linguistically and conceptually, a discourse on citizenship alone is not enough to encompass the world-making stakes inherent in the act of creatively imagining the geographical?

In what follows, I demonstrate that by examining the acts of citizenship⁷⁸ performed by Iranian women in different geographical spaces, we can capture the poetics of their interventions as world-making. I address the circumstances surrounding Sahar Khodayari’s 2019 self-immolation in Iran. Sahar, also known as the Blue Girl, was facing a six-month prison sentence for having entered a stadium to watch football. She set herself on fire in front of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran on September 2, 2019. She died a week later. Social media

outlets and some Persian news sources from inside Iran reported that Sahar's family claimed that she was diagnosed as bipolar and had attempted suicide in the past. They had informed the court about her mental health, but this information did not impact the state's interactions with her. Slowly stories also began to emerge on social media about the unstable family life that Sahar was enduring. On the surface, her self-immolation seemed to target the state, represented by the Islamic Republic's judicial system. However, other narratives also competed with this one as Iranians reflected on her life and death.

I also bring into the conversation the 2018 suicide of Nasim Aghdam in California in order to highlight the relevance of comparative studies to gender politics in the MENA. Nasim was a vegan activist and YouTuber who became angry about restrictions YouTube placed on her channel. In response, Nasim opened fire at YouTube offices in San Bruno, wounded three people, and died as a result of a self-inflicted gunshot. When reflecting on YouTube's decision to restrict her page, Nasim stated that there was no freedom of speech in the "real world."⁷⁹ In other words, despite the fact that she only opened fire on people working at YouTube (in a manner the police described as entailing "no rhyme or reason")⁸⁰—she did not hold only YouTube accountable for her anguish but apparently viewed the corporation's policies as connected to the state and world in which she lived. Her family was shocked by her actions, and apologized to "all of humanity" saying that she would never hurt an ant.⁸¹

I encourage readers to imagine frameworks other than citizenship to help them make sense of Sahar and Nasim's stories, and indeed this was my initial motivation for writing about these women's deaths in a

comparative fashion. However, similar to other scholars working on gender and the MENA, I find the pursuit of citizenship and rights is often connected to gender struggles in Iran. I piece together parts of Sahar and Nasim's mysterious stories with the intent of addressing what is missing from the dominant view on citizenship in gender studies of the MENA. That is, to conceive of citizenship as an institution that includes a focus on how statuses, rights, and responsibilities are forged or undermined overlooks the transferability and placelessness of citizenship, or what Engin Isin identifies as the universality of citizenship.⁸² The comparative aspect of this essay demonstrates how Sahar and Nasim's manners of death posit the reentering of the body as a tool for world-making. This turning away from the nation-state to the self makes consideration of additional lenses, such as world-making and acts of citizenship, necessary to understand struggles that are connected to citizenship as an institution regulating rights, roles, and responsibilities.

There are several lessons to be learned for gender studies in the MENA, particularly in relation to citizenship, through an examination of the narratives surrounding the suicide deaths of these two Iranian women living in Iran and the U.S. First, the common themes that emerge from the women's deaths—such as the real possibility of liberation for the living by connecting with the dead through spatial movement—demonstrate that the academic commitment to a state-centered form of democratic change in the region prevents us from seeing the new politics and sensibilities that women from the MENA not only embody, but also share with women elsewhere. Second, as we witness these tragic and untimely deaths, we are forced to question what frameworks are overlooked when citizenship, rights, and equality come to define the entirety of

women's desires. I argue that a focus on Engin Isin's notion of acts of citizenship (instead of rights alone) allows us to connect three poles of citizenship—institution, body, and space. By unifying these three different poles of citizenship, citizenship can be refashioned in such a way that it possible for us to imagine its afterlives in the form of connectivities and world-making. Lastly, my argument has implications for the ways in which we study the 2011 uprisings and the role of women during and after these moments. Given that citizenship has become a dominant framework for these investigations, it is important to remain critical of how the concept operates in our work.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues with Citizenship Studies in the MENA

Since the optimism that followed the 2011 uprisings for many women in the MENA, and the subsequent disappointment they encountered, gendered investigations of women's roles during and after the uprisings have highlighted the centrality of citizenship.⁸³ While a lens on citizenship and rights is essential to understanding women's political participation before and after the uprisings, there are other questions to ask and conceptual frameworks to consider.⁸⁴ This task becomes particularly urgent when we remember that citizenship is a tool through which the modern nation state distinguishes insiders/outside, respectability, and community within its population. Hence, investigations benefit from exploring what women's creative energies in the face of political upheavals are producing in addition to the obvious demand for equality, justice and a clarification on rights and statuses.

My reframing of citizenship is grounded in Engin Isin's notion of acts of citizenship.

Citizenship is a tool for states to categorize their populations, as well as a set of rights and responsibilities. Citizenship can be enacted from above or below, it can be rights and/or responsibilities, but *acts of citizenship*, including self-immolation and murder/suicide, are interventions that challenge these routine citizenship regimes.⁸⁵ Social inquiry produces rigorous scientific explanations through categorizations, classifications, and measurements, but the knowledge overlooked in such an inquiry is the poetics of Sahar and Nasim's acts of citizenship.⁸⁶ These are bodily directed interventions. They may have been ignited due to institutional discrimination, but they ultimately redefine notions of space and home in ways that challenge the grip of the state over imagination. My methodological framework accommodates the more atomized forms of gender activism that have emerged in the MENA, where, since 2011, organized political movements and cooperation with the state are less central to people's interventions.⁸⁷

I suggest that refashioning citizenship by bringing citizenship as an institution and as bodily intervention together, makes visible the space for movement between different worlds, between the living and the dead. This perspective is needed, not least of all because of the cultural significance of martyrdom and remembering for segments of the population in the MENA. Additionally, a refashioning of citizenship in this manner also makes tangible politics and sensibilities that are less often addressed in gender studies of the MENA. This is because such findings rest below our line of vision as academics. For instance, for young Iranians on social media the shock surrounding Sahar and Nasim's deaths lingers, creating a back and forth movement between this world and the one Sahar and Nasim were pushed towards by the nation-states in which they lived.

The silences, confusion, and missing pieces of Sahar and Nasim's stories highlight the importance of more comparative investigations of women's experiences in the MENA. As Wynter has argued, binary depictions of knowledge/ignorance, habitable/uninhabitable, and other universal forms of distinguishing spaces date back to the pre-fifteenth-century feudal understandings of geographies.⁸⁸ If we move beyond a colonial conceptualization of space that undergirds the separation of area studies from the international global system, what unusual or unexpected desires could we identify resting beyond the institutions that Sahar and Nasim lived within? I argue that one approach for bringing renewed visibility to questions pertaining to gender and citizenship in the MENA is to engage with Black feminist writing on the politics of liberation. Methodologically, I suggest that by looking at citizenship from different platforms and spaces, we may not only develop more substantial understandings of what women's desires encompass, but also reinvigorate imaginings of life in the thrust of citizenship.

By bringing attention to their bodies and the aesthetics of their deaths, we find in Sahar and Nasim's stories individual acts of subjectivation. Studying the moment of subjectivation gives us a route to imaginatively piece together the kind of world Nasim and Sahar were constructing.⁸⁹ The moment of subjectivation is entangled with Sahar and Nasim's acts of citizenship because they reentered their bodies on their own terms as they committed suicide. However, self-immolation and (attempted) murder/suicide also pose questions about the limits of the state's centrality to women's imagination. When considering that both women were upset by the impact of the

state's legal parameters on their lives, this ramification becomes more urgent.

While I focus on dead bodies, my attention to the connection between bodies, space, and world-making also builds on current trends in studies of gender and politics in the MENA.⁹⁰ Scholars have addressed women's bodies as "fluid and culturally mediated" with the capacity to engender revolutionary transformations in the MENA.⁹¹ What I call for is a broader understanding of which bodies count, and those disruptive acts of citizenship, such as self-immolation and murder/suicide, expose world-making in ways that acts of citizenship enacted by the living do not reveal.

The Pursuit of Liberation: Sahar, Nasim, the Space that Separates Us, and Possibilities of World-Making

Sahar's name means "just before dawn" in Arabic; Nasim means "breeze." I find the women's names to be powerful in how they capture the forging of space through air and not nothingness.⁹² In both cases, reentering one's own body occurs as the women acknowledge their own stories (which are for them to tell as Christina Sharpe reminds us and I make no claims on). Yet through the act of reentering their bodies with suicide, they used the air to create distance between themselves and others as they intentionally made an exit before our eyes. At the same time, they also established a pathway between worlds. I see this pathway as creatively empowering because it illustrates the possibility for individuals to move away from the entrapments of the nation-state's citizenship contract. This is indeed the way liberation is generally imagined. However, liberation can also be seen in Sahar and Nasim's capacity to reenter their own bodies instead of only escaping the structures of the nation-state.

Importantly, their deaths do not make dying the only method for exiting the state. Sahar was alive for a week before finally succumbing to her injuries and Nasim was missing for a few days before opening fire on employees at the YouTube office, and finally killing herself. The story of their deaths involved a suspense that continues to keep the living hanging on, or as Lihi Ben Shitrit stated during our workshop for this newsletter, their stories “keep you up at night.” The women did not disappear but demanded respect while still present by reentering their bodies on terms that defied the state, and it is in this capacity that the air carries them back and forth. This same process makes movement between different worlds a possibility for the living. Leaving spaces of oppression need not only be sought through the pursuit of martyrdom, but the living can imagine real-time connections with their ancestors to move through their conditions with grace and force.

The bodies that Sahar and Nasim reenter as subjects who took control into their own hands are no longer defined by or limited to the citizenry structures that triggered their elevation. Once we shift our gaze toward their bodies again, which we are inclined to do due to the manner of death, they are not tied down to the methodology or mythology of the nation-state. As we become implicated in the scene by our gaze, liberation as reentering one’s own body becomes a communal vision, if not experience. The nation-state defined Sahar and Nasim through the patriarchal state’s governing system, and these are contracts that they individually decided to refuse. If we focus on the bodies after the act of suicide, the pursuit of acceptance from the nation-state and a solid *home* is less central, although not necessarily bypassed. These are bodies that are questioning the patriarchal state and

home project altogether and we know that because they decided to lessen their engagement with it and turn toward themselves as we watched.

Sahar and Nasim’s self-destruction amplifies less noted outcomes of subjectivation in the form of world-making. Berlant understands world-making to be a sensual experience that captures the subtleties of sentiments, such as feeling the water beneath your feet, or the light breeze just before dawn.⁹³ From my view, as Sahar and Nasim elevated, their bodies on the ground forced me to respect the air that separated us, that continues to move in directions I cannot control. I was forced to see that as this air disorients me—for I could not follow them but they were visible—it also creates pathways for movement. I unpack Berlant’s understanding of world-making and suggest that Sahar and Nasim’s deaths show us that when space for movement is created, worlds are made. Sahar and Nasim’s decisions to commit suicide were not simply refusals or acts of disruption. Behind their decisions to reenter their own bodies rests knowledge. This is a knowing that I no longer have access to extrapolating, but it does create the conditions for other possibilities as I ponder on the space between us. Thus, one of the afterlives of these deaths is the unveiling of a world, forged through air, where the vulnerable seek refuge and are respected—where it is recognized that citizenship rights or aspirations actually do not save lives and are no longer the main motivation of those denied their dignity.

Pondering on the death of Sahar and Nasim makes me certain that I do not need a patriarchal state and home. Instead, I desire a home that is defined through living and dead loved ones and those who protect my vulnerabilities by creating a path for movement. In this sense, the pursuit of

liberation becomes tangible to me by bones, blood, bodies, lips, ideas, memories, words, but not a land. As McKittrick states, this view of liberation recognizes that “...the earth is also skin and that a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with.”⁹⁴ Diversifying our methods and research designs challenges the assumptions underlying the stability of space in the nation-state. With this research perspective, the possibilities that these same spaces make tangible begin to appear.⁹⁵ Citizenship need not only be associated with the hard labor of demanding gender equality from the state. Instead, the bodies of Sahar and Nasim are also “speaking to and across the world” with a different vision altogether that includes a lightness and a floating through air that the modern nation-state system cannot contain and that we have yet to fully explore.⁹⁶

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STATE REPRESSION AND ACTIVIST ORGANIZING IN INFORMAL SPACES: COMPARING FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN EGYPT AND IRAN

By Erika Biagini & Paola Rivetti

A decade since the so called “Arab Spring”, women’s success in advancing demands for gender change in the region is mixed. While the general consensus is that patriarchal regimes have been destabilized and things cannot go back as they were before,⁹⁷ in many countries we witnessed the resurgence of authoritarianism and state violence, which challenge women activists and movements

wanting to advance reforms.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, protests continue to erupt in the region, as witnessed in Sudan, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, among others, and women, their mobilization and demands continue to be relevant to them. How do we explain women’s ability to mobilize in contexts of authoritarianism and state violence, and where are we to look to capture the continuum of women’s protest activities and claims?

Building on our previous work,⁹⁹ we are interested in explaining what happens to women’s and feminist social movements when MENA authoritarian regimes repress them. We compare the Muslim Sisterhood (henceforth Sisterhood) in Egypt after the 2013 repression of Islamists and the progressive, pro-democracy activists for women’s rights in Iran since the repression of the 2009 Green Movement and the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani. Our contention is that when state repression causes movements’ fragmentation, marginalized activists find in informal spaces a more functional venue to sustain their activism and demands. Informal spaces, which we define as venues where activism is non-mediated by the formal leadership of an organization, explain how cycles of protests survive authoritarianism, allowing mobilizations to re-emerge as more favourable opportunities materialize again. This also explains the long history of protesting and political organizing in the region, of which the 2011 uprisings were just one peak.¹⁰⁰ This note is based on our individual research work in Egypt (2013-2018) and Iran (2015-2019) with women’s activists of both movements. While substantial parts of both works are published, this is the first attempt at a comparative analysis.

⁷¹ Bassell Salloukh, “Reimagining an alternative Lebanon: what lies beyond the sectarian system,” *Executive*, 8 November 2019.

⁷² Examples include Egypt’s “Protest Law” of 2013, Jordan’s 2015 cybercrime law, and a wide range of counterterrorism laws in the region that increase governments’ legal powers to restrict speech.

⁷³ For a thorough treatment of women and gender in the 2011 uprising in Egypt, see Sherine Hafez, *Women of the Midan: the Untold Stories of Egypt’s Revolutionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019) and Nermin Allam’s *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Both works make it clear that gender issues are not simply policy questions of the moment, but integrally connected to state-society relations both historically and currently.

⁷⁴ On Saudi dissent and repression in this case and more broadly, see Jennifer Pan and Alexandra A. Siegel, “How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent,” *American Political Science Review* 114:1 (2020).

⁷⁵ See for example Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention,” June 2012; Louisa Loveluck, “Syrian forces use widespread sexual violence to humiliate and silence male prisoners,” *Washington Post*, 11 March 2019.

⁷⁶ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, “Detention of Women in Syria: a weapon of war and terror,” <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/321-emhrn-womenindetention-en-final.pdf> (Copenhagen, 2015).

Shirin Saeidi Notes

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⁷⁸ Isin, E., 2008. Theorizing Acts of Citizenship. In: E. Isin and G. Nielsen, eds. *Acts of Citizenship*. London and New York: Zed Books, pp. 15–43.

⁷⁹ Gosk, S., Rainey, J., McGee, C., and Connor, T. (2018, April 13). YouTube shooter Nasim Aghdam’s father baffled by her violence. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/youtube-shooter-nasim-aghdam-was-vegan-who-had-complained-about-n862586> accessed September 23, 2020.

⁸⁰ Gosk et al., 2018.

⁸¹ Gosk et al., 2018.

⁸² Isin, E., 2017. Citizenship Studies and the Middle East. In: N. A. Butenschön and R. Meijer, eds. *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World*, pp. 511–534. UK: Brill.

⁸³ Ben Rochd, S., 2017. Mediated Femininity and Female Citizenship in Moroccan Electronic News Sites—Hespress.com as a Case Study. In: L. Touaf, S. Boutkhil, and C. Nasri, eds., 2017. *North African Women after the Arab Spring: In the Eye of the Storm*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 169–189; Touaf, L., Boutkhil, S., and Nasri, C., eds. 2017. *North African Women after the Arab Spring: In the Eye of the Storm*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Khalil, 2015.

⁸⁴ Saeidi, S., 2018. Iran’s Hezbollah and Citizenship Politics: The Surprises of Religious Legislation in a Hybrid Regime. In: N. A. Butenschön and R. Meijer, eds., *The Middle East in Transition: The Centrality of Citizenship*, pp. 223–48. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

⁸⁵ Isin, 2008.

⁸⁶ Césaire, A., 1996. Poetry and Knowledge. In: M. Richardson, ed. *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, pp. 134–146. Tr. M. Richardson and K. Fijalkowski. New York: Verso.

⁸⁷ Khalil, A., ed., 2015. *Gender, Women, and the Arab Spring*. London: Routledge.

⁸⁸ Ansfield, B., 2015. Still Submerged: The Uninhabitability of Urban Redevelopment. In K. McKittrick, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 124–141; Wynter, S., 1995. 1492: A New World View. In: V. L. Hyatt and R. Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, pp. 5–57. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

⁸⁹ Morrison, T., 1991. The Sites of Memory. In: R. Ferguson, M. Gever, T. T. Minhha, and C. West, eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, pp. 299–305. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

⁹⁰ Hasso, F. S. and Salime, Z., eds., 2016. *Freedom Without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

⁹¹ Hafez, S., 2014. Bodies that Protest: The Girl in the Blue Bra, Sexuality, and State Violence in Revolutionary Egypt. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 20–28.

⁹² Irigaray, L., 2002. *The Way of Love*. London: Continuum. Tr. by H. Bostic and S. Pluháček.

⁹³ Berlant, L., 2009. Unworlding. *Supervalent Thought* blog. May 13, 2009.

⁹⁴ McKittrick, K., 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁹⁵ McKittrick, 2006.

⁹⁶ McKittrick, 2006, p. xxviii.

Erika Biagini and Paola Rivetti Notes