

Mothers Who Mourn the Nation. The Politics of Grief and Women's Subjectivation in Iran

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* uprising and the intensification of state repression, bereaved mothers have once again come to occupy a central place in Iran's contested public sphere. Gathering at gravesites, in the streets, and across digital platforms, they mourn loved ones killed in protests and state violence, linking contemporary losses to earlier periods of repression, from the early years of the Islamic Republic to more recent unrest, including the 2026 Grand Bazaar strikes triggered by economic crisis. Their mourning extends beyond personal grief, articulating a broader sense of collective loss and a wounded national community. In this process, mourning becomes a sustained form of public claim-making that challenges the state's authority to define and represent the nation. While existing scholarship on maternal activism has often understood mourning primarily as a form of moral protest, it has paid less attention to how politicized mourning operates as an ongoing process of political subjectivation, one that generates agency, resilience, and solidarities across generational, ethnic, and religious divides.

Building on earlier work,¹ this article offers a new analytical lens for understanding how the Iranian Mothers for Justice (*Mādarān-e Dādkhāh*) transform loss into a politics of grief through which women mourn and speak on behalf of the nation. Its central contribution is to conceptualize politicized mourning as an enduring process of political subjectivation, in which grief becomes a source of agency, resistance, and collective identification under authoritarian rule. Situating this activism within a broader genealogy of maternal protest since 1979, the article argues that collective mourning has become a key site through which women emerge as political subjects, despite a theocratic system that seeks to confine them to domestic and moral roles.

Drawing on ethnography, historical records, media sources, and personal narratives, the analysis shows how these mothers rework dominant ideals of motherhood to produce a counter-subjectivity that challenges both patriarchal and religious authority. In this process, politicized mourning not only reshapes their own identities but also amplifies the voices of the disappeared, imprisoned, and executed, fostering solidarities that cut across ethnic, religious, and generational divides, while unsettling official narratives of nationhood, martyrdom, and justice. The article thus asks: how does politicized maternal mourning within the Mothers for Justice movement enable women's political subjectivation, agency, and resilience under the authoritarian conditions of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Keywords: motherhood, subjectivation, resistance, agency, politics

REWORKING MOTHERHOOD

Viewed through the lens of subjectivation theory, motherhood moves beyond the confines of a privatized domestic role to emerge as a politically charged site of identity formation and resistance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of subjectivation as the process through which individuals constitute themselves in and through relations of power (Foucault 1982), this analysis examines how, in the Islamic Republic, motherhood is framed as a moral vocation defined by piety, sacrifice, and domestic duty, and as a central mechanism through

¹ Sabet Sarvestany, Raha. "Politicized Mourning and Collective Subjectivation in Post-revolution Iran: The Case of Iranian Mothers for Justice." In *Social Revolts as Events of Political Subjectivation*, edited by Oriana Bernasconi, Ángel Aedo, Damián Omar Martínez, Alicia Olivari, Fernando Pairicán, and Juan Porma, London: Routledge, 2025

which women are expected to reproduce both the nation and the Islamic moral order (Paidar 1995; Moghissi 1999; Najmabadi 2005; Moghadam 2003). Against this backdrop, women actively rework these state-sanctioned expectations. Maternal subjectivation here refers to the ways in which mothers repurpose socially prescribed roles of care into sites of dissent and political claim-making. Rather than conforming to the ideal of the obedient and self-sacrificing mother, they mobilize the symbolic authority of motherhood to confront the state. Shared experiences of care and loss thus become collective resources, transforming nurturing practices into forms of resistance that demand accountability and structural change.

Judith Butler's theorization of grievability and public mourning helps further clarify how these maternal practices interrupt sovereign power by demanding recognition for lives that the state renders precarious or ungrievable. When mothers insist on naming, remembering, and publicly displaying the bodies and stories of their deceased children, they challenge the regime's efforts to erase, naturalize, or depoliticize those deaths. In doing so, grief becomes a performative act that exposes and delegitimizes state violence (Butler 2004, 2009). In the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially in the aftermath of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, practices of grievability have undergone a visible transformation, increasingly mediated through Instagram and other social media platforms. Traditional, religiously inflected rituals centred on Qur'anic recitation are now often supplemented, and sometimes displaced, by video-recorded speeches from mothers, sisters, and other relatives of the killed. Circulated widely online, these testimonies narrate the circumstances of death and address a broader public

In these clips, women invite viewers to bear witness to the loss of a young generation whose demands were limited to basic rights yet met with lethal state violence. They frequently describe the deceased as "children of the nation," framing their lives and deaths as part of a broader struggle for collective freedom and dignity (Khosravi-Ooryad 2024; Gishnizjani 2025; Sigurdardottir et al. 2024). In doing so, grief is transformed into a powerful and care-inflected call for accountability, one that extends beyond the gravesite through digital circulation and affective forms of engagement, including hashtags and shared visual narratives. On Instagram, mourning practices increasingly incorporate secular and popular cultural elements, such as recorded songs, live music, collective singing, and carefully curated gravesites. Families often share images of tombs adorned with cakes and balloons marking birthdays, gestures that reintegrate the deceased into everyday social life rather than confining their memory to formal religious rituals. These practices contribute to what scholars describe as forms of digital feminist placemaking and the creation of affective archives of trauma and resistance (Khosravi-Ooryad 2024; Gishnizjani 2025; Sigurdardottir et al. 2024). Analytically, such recurring forms of expression point to a broader pattern in which mourning practices become key sites for the production of collective identity and political meaning.

Feminist scholarship on maternal politics and motherhood as a political category deepens this analysis by demonstrating how motherhood, long naturalized as private, apolitical care work, can become a source of moral authority and oppositional practice (Ruddick 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Collins 1994; Phoenix 1991; Butler 2004, 2009). Rather than simply reproducing dominant gender norms, these mothers mobilize culturally valued ideals of maternal sacrifice to claim public legitimacy and expand the moral language of dissent. Motherhood thus emerges as a contested site where passivity and resistance intersect, enabling women to voice claims that might otherwise be dismissed. Critical and post-structural approaches to political subjectivation (Foucault 1982; Butler 1997, 2004, 2009) illuminate how the Islamic Republic's ideological construction of motherhood is taken up, negotiated, and unsettled at the level of subjectivity. Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification as a mode of engaging dominant norms by reworking them from within (Muñoz 1999), the experiences of mothers in Iran reveal a nuanced reconfiguration of the regime's gendered expectations. These women refuse the ideal of the obedient, self-sacrificing, patriotic Muslim mother, yet they do not abandon the moral language of motherhood. Instead, they appropriate and redirect its symbolic authority to contest state violence.

In this context, politicized mourning operates as a process of political subjectivation through which grief becomes generative of agency and collective identification. By invoking their ethical and social responsibility as mothers, these women claim the right to demand truth, accountability, and protection, not only for their own children, but for the broader social body. In doing so, they expose the contradiction between the regime's exaltation of motherhood as sacred and its readiness to imprison, injure, and kill the very children whose lives

mothers are expected to safeguard. Maternal mourning thus shifts from a private, ritualized practice into a public and confrontational form of claim-making, transforming embodied vulnerability into sustained dissent under conditions of repression. This conceptual focus guides the analysis that follows, where ethnographic, historical, and digital materials are read not simply as representations of loss, but as sites through which political subjectivities are actively produced and sustained.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, multi-method approach to examine how maternal mourning in contemporary Iran becomes a site of political subjectivation, agency, and resilience. Bringing together insights from digital ethnography, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis, the research focuses not only on what mourning represents, but on how it operates as a social and political practice through which subjectivities are formed and sustained. The analysis draws on a diverse set of materials, including ethnographic observations, historical accounts, media documentation, and personal narratives. These include participation in commemorative gatherings, mourning rituals, and informal family conversations, as well as historical sources that trace continuities between contemporary Mothers for Justice and earlier forms of maternal activism since 1979. Documentation from human rights organizations, such as Justice for Iran² and the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center,³ provides contextual grounding and supports the interpretation of patterns of violence, imprisonment, and resistance.

To ensure methodological transparency, the study employs purposive and theoretically informed sampling across its diverse source base. Materials were selected based on their relevance to practices of maternal mourning, justice-seeking, and public expressions of grief in relation to state violence. This includes testimonies, commemorative performances, digital posts, and documented cases that explicitly articulate themes of loss, accountability, and collective identification. Sources that lacked direct engagement with these thematic concerns or could not be sufficiently contextualized were excluded. A central component of the study is the analysis of digital and visual media. Using a digital ethnographic approach, the research engages with publicly available content on Instagram and, to a lesser extent, Facebook, including videos, images, and written posts shared by bereaved mothers, relatives, and activists. These materials include gravesite speeches, commemorative practices, birthday rituals at graves, musical performances, and collective acts of remembrance. Social media platforms are approached as dynamic sites where mourning is publicly performed, circulated, and transformed.

Discourse and narrative analysis guide the interpretation of these materials, with particular attention to recurring motifs such as “shared pain,” “children of the nation,” justice-seeking claims, and expressions of solidarity. Rather than treating these sources as static representations of grief, the study analyzes them as situated practices through which meanings are produced and political subjectivities are negotiated. To clarify the analytical pathway, the study systematically traces how key themes emerge across the collected materials through iterative comparison and close reading. Particular attention was given to how these recurring patterns informed the analytical categories employed in this article. Themes such as resistance, solidarity, and political subjectivation were not predefined, but inductively developed through repeated engagement with the data and refined through iterative comparison across cases and contexts. This process allowed the analysis to move from descriptive accounts of grief toward identifying the mechanisms through which mourning becomes politicized and generative of collective agency.

The analytical procedure follows an iterative process of close reading and thematic coding, through which recurring motifs, narrative patterns, and discursive formations are identified and interpreted. Triangulation across historical records, digital media, and human rights documentation further strengthens the analysis by cross-validating patterns and situating individual accounts within broader socio-political dynamics. This approach allows for tracing how politicized mourning emerges across embodied, narrative, and digital domains, and how it connects individual experiences of loss to collective forms of agency. Ethical considerations are central to research design. The study relies primarily on publicly accessible materials and anonymizes individuals where

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20160204070539/http://justice4iran.org/justice-for-iran-about/>

³ <https://iranhrdc.org/>

appropriate, except in cases involving public figures who actively seek visibility. Given the sensitivity of the topic, particular care is taken to avoid re-traumatization and to acknowledge the risks associated with digital traces in highly securitized environments. This study is subject to several limitations. Its reliance on publicly available materials, particularly digital content, means that the analysis captures mediated and self-presented forms of mourning rather than private or less visible experiences. In addition, uneven access to sources across regions and communities may limit representational balance, while the interpretive nature of the analysis foregrounds depth and conceptual insight over claims of empirical generalizability.

Genealogy and Narratives of Maternal Resistance

My approach in this study does not seek to reconstruct a fixed or organizational history of Mothers for Justice in Iran. Rather, it understands this movement as a lived and continually evolving field of maternal mourning and political claim-making that unfolds across successive waves of repression. Instead of tracing a linear chronology, the analysis focuses on narratives, images, and commemorative practices as they are remembered, mediated, and retold by mothers themselves. The narratives presented in this section are analyzed within a broader interpretive framework through which recurring themes of resistance, solidarity, and political subjectivation are identified and developed.

While the mass executions of the 1980s provide an important historical anchor, I conceptualize “Mothers for Justice” in a broader sense. The term encompasses mothers whose children have been killed, disappeared, imprisoned, expelled, injured, or psychologically devastated across different moments of state violence, including the chain murders of the 1990s,⁴ the 1999 Tehran University dormitory attacks,⁵ the downing of Flight 752 in 2020,⁶ the 2022 Woman Life Freedom uprising,⁷ and more recent episodes of protest and repression.⁸ It also includes mothers advocating for children living with permanent injuries, such as blindness caused by targeted violence, as well as those whose children endured severe psychological trauma and physical torture that ultimately led to suicide.

I argue that the sustained engagement of mothers in justice-seeking practices reveals a distinctly intergenerational dynamic. Over time, maternal mourning has expanded beyond those directly bereaved to encompass an increasingly diverse gathering of mothers and allies, thereby deepening solidarity and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. This expansion has been central to the stability of justice claims, enabling them to persist across shifting political contexts and generations. Maternal activism in Iran exemplifies collective political subjectivation, as individual grief is transformed into a shared struggle that challenges state ideals of motherhood and reclaims maternal identity as a source of agency and resistance. In the aftermath of the 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, invoking those killed or executed as the “children of Iran” signals an affective and political reconfiguration of motherhood beyond biological ties, turning mourning into a collective ethical claim and a mobilizing force across social and party-political, generational, and ethnic and religious divides.

⁴ The politically motivated killings in the 1990s, known as the “Chain Murders,” targeted dissidents, intellectuals, and opposition figures in Iran. Occurring between 1998 and 1999, these murders were widely believed to have been orchestrated by the Ministry of Intelligence to suppress dissent and opposition. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-intelligence-organizations-and-transnational-suppression>

⁵ The violent crackdown on students at Tehran University dormitories in 1999 occurred when security forces stormed the dorms, arresting, injuring, and killing several students protesting against the government. This event became a pivotal moment in the history of student activism in Iran. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3879535.stm

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Ukraine-International-Airlines-flight-752>

⁷ Civil unrest and protests against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran associated with the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini.

⁸ At least 36 people have been killed during the last 10 days of protests across Iran, The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp37w9xnxxwo>, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601066203>

Mothers of Khavaran

The mass executions of the 1980s constitute not only a historical episode of state violence, but also a formative moment in the politicization of maternal grief in post-revolutionary Iran. The systematic targeting of political dissidents and ethnic and religious minorities following the Islamic Revolution, culminating in the 1988 massacre of political prisoners,⁹ created conditions in which mothers were compelled to move beyond private mourning and enter the public sphere in pursuit of truth, justice, and accountability (Afary 2009; Moin 1999). Khavaran cemetery, located in southeastern Tehran, became both a physical and symbolic site where maternal mourning was transformed into collective political subjectivation. As the unmarked burial ground for many executed political prisoners, Khavaran reflected the state's attempt to erase evidence of violence, while mothers' repeated visits re-inscribed memory, presence, and moral claims onto the landscape. These weekly gatherings, most notably on Fridays, developed into an ongoing practice through which grief was collectivized and rendered politically meaningful. The practices and narratives examined here are interpreted as part of a broader analytical framework that traces recurring patterns of collective grief, resistance, and political subject formation.

Testimonies gathered by Justice for Iran Organization¹⁰ illustrate how these practices were marked by both repression and resilience. As Ladan¹¹ recalls, *"The Mothers of Khavaran never stayed silent [...] they were subjected to verbal abuse and physical assault, but they continued their work."* Her account highlights how mourning became inseparable from action: letter-writing campaigns, collective petitions, and repeated visits to judicial and religious authorities functioned as everyday forms of resistance under conditions of extreme constraint. Even when access to power was mediated or denied, *"Since their children were in prison, they pursued justice. They often went to the judiciary and often gathered in front of 'Montazeri'¹²'s house. Of course, they never spoke directly with him; either his son-in-law would come out of the house or his younger son."*¹³ the act of assembling, writing, and returning constituted a refusal of imposed silence.

Through these practices, maternal grief was reconfigured into a shared political perspective, formalized in the emergence of the Mothers of Khavaran. Their activism illustrates how motherhood, rather than remaining confined to the state's idealized framework of sacrifice and passivity, was mobilized as a source of agency and resilience. While there is no evidence of direct contact with Latin American movements such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the striking similarities underscore a broader feminist pattern in which maternal mourning operates as a durable mode of collective resistance against authoritarian erasure.

⁹ Thousands of political activists, including Marxists, members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, and ethnic and religious minorities such as Bahá'ís, were executed in the decade following the Islamic Revolution, with the 1988 massacre of political prisoners representing a particularly brutal episode. Although the exact number of extrajudicial executions in 1988 remains unknown, minimum estimates by Amnesty International place the death toll between 4,000 and 5,000 during a coordinated campaign of secret killings carried out in prisons across the country. For more information visit this link:

https://www.irandemocratic.org/public_html/news/10024/?utm_source=chatgpt.com,
https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/10/blood-soaked-secrets/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁰ The Justice for Iran Organization has collected numerous testimonies from the families of those executed, documenting human rights violations from the perspective of lawyers. Their research report, *The Untold Story: The Mothers and Families of Khavaran; Three Decades of Seeking Truth and Justice*, highlights the ongoing protests and activities led by the mothers and families of the executed. <https://justice4iran.org/persian/projects/painscapes/unfinishedtales/>

¹¹ Ladan's brother (Bijan Bazargan) was arrested at the age of 23 and was 29 when he was executed. Ladan reflects: "All the sorrows are one thing, but the fact that it took 10 years for us to find out what happened to our loved ones and why they were suddenly executed is another. It took 10 years for us to learn about the 'Death Commission' and Khomeini's orders, and this was a great pain, not knowing for 10 years."

¹² Montazeri was one of the leading figures of the Iranian revolution and was destined to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini. However, he fell out with Khomeini in 1988, accusing the regime of violating freedom and human rights. https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hosseini-Ali_Montazeri

¹³ Masoumi, P. "Summer of '67: The Untold Story of the Mothers of Khavaran [Interview with Ladan Bazargan]." *IranWire*, August 2018. <https://iranwire.com/fa/citizen-rights/2751/>

Mothers of Aban

November 2019 killings¹⁴ constitute a critical moment in which maternal mourning was reconstituted as a collective political practice. The violent state crackdown that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of protesters catalyzed the emergence of the Mothers of Aban, a formation in which grief was neither privatized nor silenced but publicly articulated and digitally mediated. Social media, particularly Instagram, became a central arena through which mourning was shared, collectivized, and transformed into claims for justice, enabling mothers to recognize one another as political subjects bound by a common loss.

Interviews and public testimonies reveal how maternal grief operates as a process of political subjectivation. Nahid, the mother of Pouya,¹⁵ explicitly frames mourning as a shared condition that produces collective agency rather than isolation: *"We, the grieving mothers, with this shared pain, have a better understanding of each other. We are like an association, a united group in our pursuit of justice [...] We demand a fair trial for those responsible for this grief. We have come to Laghman Hospital to tell Behnam's mother that we have felt this pain just as she has, that we are like her, and that we understand the grief she is enduring. When my son was killed, other grieving mothers came to me to offer their sympathy. At that time, I didn't realize the significance of their presence[...] But now I know how powerful this sympathy and solidarity can be."*¹⁶ Her emphasis on "shared pain" and "being like an association" signals a shift from individualized suffering to a politicized collectivity, in which maternal identity becomes the basis for justice-seeking action. Importantly, Nahid frames solidarity itself as a form of agency, describing how practices of presence, visiting hospitals, standing beside newly bereaved mothers, and sharing grief, transform suffering into mutual strength. This testimony reflects a broader pattern identified across the data, in which individual grief is rearticulated as a shared condition that enables solidaristic identification and collective claims for justice.

Similarly, Sakineh Ahmadi, the mother of Ebrahim,¹⁷ articulates resilience as an affective and relational process that emerges through collective mourning: *"We mothers, when we see each other, feel a little better [...] We stand together to show our strength[...] We don't want more innocent young people to be killed. This law and this government are oppressing the youth. We don't want other mothers to go through what we have."*¹⁸ Her testimony underscores how maternal gatherings function not only as sites of remembrance, but also as spaces where political demands, accountability, justice, and the prevention of further violence, are articulated. In this sense, mourning becomes both an emotional practice and a political intervention, directly challenging the state's

¹⁴ The mass protests in November 2019 were sparked by a sudden fuel price hike, leading to violent repression by the Iranian government, which used live ammunition and other tactics to suppress the protests. While the exact death toll remains unclear, human rights organizations estimate that several hundred people were killed during the crackdown. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/17/iran-no-justice-bloody-2019-crackdown>

¹⁵ Pouya Bakhtiari was an Iranian protester who was shot and killed on 16 November 2019 in Karaj during the 2019 Iranian protests. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pouya_Bakhtiari

Nahid Shirpishhe, mother of Pouya Bakhtiari, has been sentenced to five years in prison on charges of "contacting a foreign intelligence service," "receiving money," and "spreading false information." She is currently held in Zanjan prison. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/33071679.html>

¹⁶ Qajar, A. "Grieving and Justice-Seeking Mothers: From Argentina to Khavaran, From Cuba to Laghman Hospital [Interview with Nahid Shirpishhe]." *IranWire*, February 19, 2021. <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/46267/>.

¹⁷ Ebrahim Ketabdar, 30-year-old, a bystander shot dead during the protests, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/01/father-karaj-shot-november-iran-protests-ketabdar/>
More than 300 people across the country were killed during the state's violent crushing of the street protests that broke out across Iran in November 2019 after the government announced a steep increase in the price of gasoline (with some estimates many times higher than that number). Many bystanders were killed due to security forces' indiscriminate firing of live ammunition into crowds of unarmed civilians. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/12/iran-thousands-arbitrarily-detained-and-at-risk-of-torture-in-chilling-post-protest-crackdown/>

¹⁸ Qajar, A. "Grieving and Justice-Seeking Mothers: From Argentina to Khavaran, From Cuba to Laghman Hospital [Interview with Nahid Shirpishhe]." *IranWire*, February 19, 2021. <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/46267/>.

portrayal of mothers as passive bearers of sacrifice. Across similar narratives, such expressions of shared suffering recur as key elements through which collective grief is transformed into forms of solidarity and political agency.

Shohreh Pakravan as Method

The interview conducted by Shiva Qaloozi and Maria Qaloozi (2024) with Shohreh Pakravan,¹⁹ the mother of Reyhaneh Jabbari, illuminates how grief operates as a translocal and intergenerational process of political subjectivation among justice-seeking mothers in Iran. Pakravan's narrative traces the formation of maternal networks that link Kurdistan, Tehran, and other regions, revealing how mourning is transformed into a shared political practice that sustains agency and resilience over time.

Pakravan recalls that several months after her daughter's execution, she was taken to meet the mother of a young man executed decades earlier. Reflecting on this encounter, she observes: *"I realized that even after more than 30 years since the execution of her loved ones, she still felt the same way I did a few months after my daughter's execution... this grief never goes away, it doesn't fade, it only changes shape."* This reflection foregrounds maternal mourning as an enduring affective condition that exceeds temporal boundaries, linking women across generations through shared experience. Analytically, this moment marks a shift from individualized grief to collective recognition, in which mourning becomes the basis for political subjectivation. Such narratives, repeated across different encounters, illustrate how grief is collectively recognized and reworked into a shared framework through which political subjectivities take shape.

According to Qaloozi (2024), this encounter prompted Pakravan to actively seek out other bereaved families, initiating a chain of visits that extended across multiple cities, including Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Rasht, Shiraz, and beyond. As Pakravan explains, *"Once you meet a family who has lost a loved one, they introduce you to two other families."*²⁰ This process of relational expansion demonstrates how forms of maternal agency emerge not through formal organization, but through affective and embodied encounters that generate networks of solidarity. Mourning thus functions as a connective force, enabling mothers to recognize one another as participants in a shared struggle for justice.

Pakravan's visit to the home of Farzad Kamangar's²¹ mother in Sanandaj further illustrates how maternal mourning resists both erasure and state-imposed narratives of closure. When Pakravan asks whether she visits her son's symbolic grave, the mother responds: *"No, I never went [...] After a few years, you came with your friend to visit me, and that shows that Farzad is still alive among the people. In my heart, he is alive [...] A living person doesn't need a grave."*

This refusal to anchor grief in a physical burial site constitutes a powerful act of symbolic resistance, reconfiguring mourning as a living presence rather than a contained ritual. The gifting of a white scarf by Farzad's mother, associated with the Peace Mothers of Kurdistan, materializes this resilience, marking the transmission of mourning as both memory and ethical commitment.

Pakravan's reflection on carrying this encounter with her into exile demonstrates how maternal mourning operates as a psychological and political resource. Pakravan reflects, *"Whenever I felt homesick, I would tell myself, [...] A living person doesn't need a grave. Reyhaneh is alive in your heart. 'This thought helped me keep*

¹⁹ She is the mother of Reyhaneh Jabbari, who was executed in 2014 for killing the man who tried to rape her in 2007. Later, she was forced into exile in Germany with her two remaining daughters because of her activism. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/15/shole-pakravan-an-iranian-woman-fighting-the-death-penalty_6022994_4.html

²⁰ Qaloozi, Shiva, and Maria Qaloozi. "Mothers of Reconciliation in Kurdistan: Motherhood as a Form of Resistance and Advocacy for Human Rights—An Examination of the Activism of Kurdish Justice-Seeking Mothers (1991–2023)." *Govarikomar*, August 2024. <https://govarikomar.org/مادران-آشتی-کُردستان-مادر-ی-به-عنوان-ش/>

²¹ Farzad Kamangar (1975–2010) was an Iranian Kurdish teacher, poet, journalist, and human rights activist from Kamyaran. He was executed on 9 May 2010 after being convicted by an Islamic Revolutionary Court on charges of *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and alleged ties to PJAK. His lawyer stated that no evidence in the case files supported these accusations.

myself psychologically intact." Rather than immobilizing her, grief becomes a means of sustaining subjectivity and action under conditions of displacement and repression. Through Pakravan's experiences of visiting bereaved mothers, maternal mourning emerges as a site where agency and resilience are continuously produced, challenging the state's idealized construction of motherhood as passive endurance and instead asserting mothers as active bearers of memory, justice, and political life.

Across interviews and digital narratives, recurring phrases such as "shared pain," "standing together," and "not wanting other mothers to suffer" form a discursive repertoire through which maternal mourning is collectivized and sustained. These expressions demonstrate how grief is mobilized as a source of agency and resilience, enabling mothers to persist despite repression and intimidation. As in other global movements of justice-seeking mothers,²² the Iranian case illustrates how mourning can generate durable forms of belonging and solidarity. Yet, situated within Iran's authoritarian and religious context, these practices acquire particular force, transforming maternal identity into a counter-hegemonic political subjectivity that endures across cycles of violence and repression.

Recasting Minority Mothers

The narratives of mothers from Iran's diverse religious and ethnic communities exemplify "othered" forms of resistance to state oppression, illustrating how, through the lens of subjectivation theory, motherhood transcends its religious and ethnic boundaries to emerge as a politically charged site of identity and resistance. The Mothers of Reconciliation in Kurdistan²³, founded in 2002, exemplify how marginalized maternal narratives articulate "othered" resistance within the Iranian context. Supporting mothers of Kurdish activists and opposing state repression, they transform collective grief into political action. Recognizable by their white headscarves, a symbol of peace and solidarity, they, like Turkey's Mothers of Peace, advocate for a democratic and human rights-based resolution to the Kurdish issue. As Qaloozi (2024) demonstrates, Kurdish mothers redefine mourning as a form of subjectivation, where motherhood transcends its traditional domestic confines to become a site of identity formation and resistance.

As one mother, Sheida Rahimi, recalls, the gatherings of mothers became spaces of mutual care and emotional survival: *"The mothers would gather together and deeply care for one another. Mothers whose children were martyred or executed in the early years of the revolution denied the right to mourn or voice their pain, found solace among others who shared their grief. They would sit together for hours, talk, and find comfort in a circle of trust, where suffering could finally be spoken and shared."* Relatedly, Parvin Mohammadi highlights how solidarity transcended political divisions: *"Even though the mothers' children were affiliated with different Kurdish parties, and some even with opposing ones, what mattered most was our shared goal, justice"* (Qaloozi 2024, 21–29). These testimonies illuminate how the collective experiences of Kurdish mothers reconfigure motherhood as a site of subjectivation and political resistance, where shared loss is transformed into a unifying force that challenges both state oppression and the boundaries of ethnic and ideological difference.

Similarly, Baloch mothers, though lacking a formal organization like the Mothers of Reconciliation in Kurdistan, have emerged as powerful symbols of resistance in one of Iran's most marginalized regions²⁴, often protesting the executions and unjust arrests of their children. However, their activism has not evolved into a cohesive movement, constrained by state repression and by conservative tribal structures²⁵ grounded in patriarchal and religious ideologies that continue to restrict women's public and political participation. As Dehkordi (2023, 21–29) observes, the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" has become a rallying cry for Baloch women who have long

²² Such as Saturday Mothers (Cumartesi Anneleri, Turkey) since the 1990s, Women in Black / Mothers of Srebrenica (Bosnia-Herzegovina), and CoMadres (El Salvador)

²³ The Mothers of Reconciliation in Kurdistan represent the second wave of the Kurdish mothers' movement, emerging after the mass killings following the 1979 Revolution. Building on the activism of previous generations, they continue the struggle for justice while adapting to the evolving political landscape. Their work remains vital in the fight for human rights, Kurdish resistance, and the pursuit of peace and justice.

²⁴ <https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/11/atrocities-suffered-by-irans-minority-children-are-largely-ignored-by-world/>

²⁵ <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/monitoring-and-translation/reports/balochistan-protests-an-uprising-against-exclusion-and-injustice/>

resisted gendered and structural oppression: *“The Baloch women have never stopped fighting in our daily lives.”*²⁶

A representative of the Baloch Women’s Movement echoes this sentiment, situating their struggle within a longer history of invisible resistance: *“Over the years, Baloch women have always been active, whether individually or in groups. However, they did not receive much attention.”*²⁷ But after the Bloody Fridays²⁸, the focus shifted to Sistan and Baluchestan. The images that came from Balochestan to central Iran clearly showed systematic discrimination. But our resistance as Baloch women has not emerged overnight. For years, we have fought against reactionary thoughts and the traditional religious society, against the misogynistic policies of the Islamic Republic, and against the religious elites in power. We have fought against child marriage, polygamy, and executions, but we have been unseen.”²⁹

This unseen struggle is poignantly embodied by Sonobar³⁰, the grieving mother of Khodanoor Lojei, who voiced her pain on the first anniversary of her son’s death: *“Do not forget my son. It has been a year now. Do not ignore my child. Do not forget him [...] Whoever made my child a martyr, may God not forgive them; whoever killed my child, may God take them. God [...] may God bring justice for my child.”*³¹ Through these voices, Baloch motherhood emerges as a site of subjectivation, where personal grief is transformed into collective boldness. These narratives reveal how motherhood, far from being confined to a marginalized ethnic or domestic sphere, becomes a politically charged practice of identity and resistance, challenging the intersecting forces of patriarchy, poverty, and state violence.

In Khuzestan, where the predominantly Arab population faces systematic repression, Arab mothers have emerged as vital agents of resistance, particularly those whose children have been killed, executed, or imprisoned. Their activism parallels that of other Iranian mothers, transforming private grief into public testimony that exposes the structures of state violence. According to Dadban (Legal Consultation and Education Center for Activists), Tafiyan,³² arrested on October 2, 2022, in Ahvaz, recounted her experience: *“When I entered the ward, I was so overwhelmed that I couldn’t even say ‘hello.’ About fifty prisoners were lying side by side in pairs. I couldn’t believe that in Khuzestan, a region that had been quiet at the start of the protests, such resistance was taking shape. There were women and girls ranging from sixteen years old to myself, a mother.”* She continued, emphasizing the affective power of solidarity among women prisoners: *“My only solace was witnessing how, with such courage and bravery, they had broken taboos and were shouting ‘Women, Life, Freedom.’ Since I had been arrested at the beginning of the protests, I was unaware of what had been happening in the streets. They told me about it, and with tears, I poured out my pain. The women’s prison is where that solidarity lives, and it’s the very thing the Islamic Republic fears most.”*³³

²⁶ Dehkordi, Mahrokh. 2023. *“Women, Life, and Freedom as Told by Baloch Women.”* IranWire, January 27.

<https://iranwire.com/fa/features/113102->

²⁷ Balochistan faces deep economic hardship, marked by poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to services, that compounds women’s struggles.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Zahedan_massacre

²⁹ Dehkordi, Mahrokh. 2023. *“Women, Life, and Freedom as Told by Baloch Women.”* IranWire, January 27.

<https://iranwire.com/fa/features/113102->

³⁰ Sonobar Lojei, the mother of Khodanoor Lojei (born on October 2, 1995 – killed on October 2, 2022), a young Baloch man, was wounded by a direct gunshot from the Islamic Republic’s forces during the Bloody Friday of Zahedan, and passed away the following day in the hospital. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Khodanur_Lojei

³¹ Rezaei, R. 2023. *“Who Was Karima Baloch and How Did She Impact the Women of Balochistan, Iran?”* IranWire, December 25. <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/113102->

³² Mehrnoosh Tafián is a media activist from Khuzestan, whose work primarily focuses on environmental issues and the challenges faced by workers and marginalized communities in the province. Some of her reports have been published by the "Mehr" news agency and the "Asr Jonoob" news website. <https://journalismisnotacrime.com/fa/wall/mehrnooshtafian/>

³³ https://www.instagram.com/dadban2021/p/C_-RH6Xsvlb/, <https://dadban.info/>

As Tafiyan's testimony reveals, Ahvaz Prison holds not only alleged offenders but also countless innocent detainees, many women targeted for their kinship with perceived enemies of the state.³⁴ Within its walls, narratives of suffering and defiance recast Arab motherhood as a site of subjectivation, where private anguish transforms into collective political agency challenging patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and state repression.

In Iran, both ethnic and religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Sunnis, and Sufis, have endured enduring and systemic repression.³⁵ Within these marginalized communities, mothers have become powerful voices of resistance, demanding justice and equality despite persistent surveillance and persecution. The Bahá'í community, long targeted for its faith,³⁶ has faced arrests, executions, and systemic exclusion from education and employment, particularly following the mass executions of the 1980s.³⁷ In response, Bahá'í mothers began speaking out through informal networks and international advocacy platforms such as the Bahá'í World Community.³⁸ A striking example is the 2023 global campaign #OurStoryIsOne, launched to mark the fortieth anniversary of the execution of ten Bahá'í women in Shiraz, hanged for their belief in equality and justice. The campaign honors their legacy and that of all Iranian women resisting oppression, generating transnational solidarity through artistic tributes and human rights advocacy.³⁹ Reaching millions worldwide, and endorsed by the United Nations, government officials, Nobel laureates, artists, and prisoners of conscience, it has significantly amplified awareness of women's resistance in Iran.⁴⁰

Similarly, members of Iran's Christian community, particularly recent converts, have faced arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, and torture.⁴¹ Mothers of detained converts have emerged as advocates for their children, testifying to violations of religious freedom through underground church networks and international human rights organizations,⁴² despite constant state surveillance (Parsi 2008; Lefebvre 2014). Parallel dynamics can be observed among Sunni and Sufi communities, especially in Sistan and Baluchistan and Kurdistan, where repression remains acute. The Gonabadi Dervishes,⁴³ a prominent Sufi order, have endured repeated crackdowns; in response, mothers of detained Dervishes have organized public protests demanding justice and release (Jalili 2016). Likewise, Sunni mothers in Baluchistan and Kurdistan have mobilized against political executions and state violence.

Although often localized and fragmented, these maternal acts of defiance exemplify the political rearticulation of motherhood within Iran's religious minorities. Through the lens of subjectivation theory, such narratives reveal how motherhood, traditionally confined to domestic or spiritual domains, becomes a politically charged site of identity formation and resistance, contesting the interlocking forces of patriarchy, sectarianism, and authoritarian state power.

Transnational Mourning

During Iran's political unrest in early 2026, public mourning emerged as a deeply politicized, collective, and nationally resonant form of resistance. Across generations, genders, and social backgrounds, people took to the streets, expressing a shared sense of responsibility, even as the mobilizations were met within days by mass arrests and killings on an unprecedented scale.⁴⁴ One striking expression of this shift appears in contemporary

³⁴ (2024, December 1). *Arab women in Ahvaz prison are imprisoned and tortured instead of their relatives*. Farsi Al Arabiya. <https://farsi.alarabiya.net/iran/2020/12/26/>

³⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>

³⁶ <https://www.bahai.org/beliefs>

³⁷ <https://iranwire.com/en/bahais-of-iran/117706-mona-mahmoudnejad-the-17-year-old-bahai-girl-who-was-hanged-after-her-father/>, <https://www.saharsblog.com/bahais-in-iran/ourstoryisone-zarrin-moghimi-abyaneh-29-years-old/>

³⁸ https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/tbq_2023_f_screen.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.bic.org/news/ourstoryisone-campaign-gathers-momentum>

⁴⁰ <https://news.bahai.org/story/1686/>

⁴¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/633318488fa8f51d21dbbf85/IRN_CPIN_Christians_and_Christian_converters.pdf, <https://iranhrdc.org/fa/>

⁴² <https://articleeighteen.com/fa/articles/4075/>, <https://mohabatnews.com/fa/news/5/1335>, <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/7736/>

⁴³ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent-actions/tortured-sufi-prisoner-must-be-released>

⁴⁴ https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/iran-deaths-injuries-authorities-protest-bloodshed/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

burial rituals: mourners, ranging from relatives to the wider public, now accompany the dead with sustained applause.⁴⁵ This organic, non-institutional gesture signifies protection, reverence, and defiance, re-signifying applause from celebration into a tribute to those who confronted state violence with dignity.

In recorded videos, close family members, men and women, often without compulsory hijab, dance before coffins,⁴⁶ unsettling conventional religious norms of mourning. Far from disrespect, these acts articulate an alternative moral grammar of grief in which solidarity, defiance, and affirmation coexist, recasting grief as a form of collective agency and resilience. The uprising also articulates a collective political agency that transcends gender, directly challenging state-enforced segregation. Men and women now stand together to search for, mourn, and bury their dead.⁴⁷ Images once unthinkable in the Islamic Republic's public sphere, such as a father embracing his wife as she holds their son's body in a morgue,⁴⁸ circulate widely, despite being forbidden in official culture. Finally, nationwide solidarity has emerged in response to shared trauma. Across Iran, people provide emotional and financial support to bereaved families, transforming private grief into a collective infrastructure of care and mourning into a socially embedded form of political resistance.

This movement also extends beyond national borders. Iranians inside and outside the country are bound by shared trauma and solidarity, as mourning reverberates across diasporic communities. These connections form a transnational network of witnesses and resistance that transcends territorial boundaries (Desai 2005; Banerjee and Kankaria 2022; Stewart, Grabe, and Zheng 2024). What emerges is not merely a localized struggle for justice, but a scattered yet cohesive feminist articulation of resistance to state violence and patriarchal authoritarianism (Brunell, Johnson, and Fábíán 2010; Walby 2023). Although many aspects of the current unrest remain analytically unresolved, the intensification of state violence is unmistakable, both in scale and brutality. Repression now extends beyond public protest to civilians within their homes. Families report raids by security forces searching for satellite equipment and Starlink dishes, collapsing the boundary between public coercion and private life.⁴⁹ Eyewitness accounts also describe wounded protesters abducted, and in some cases killed, by state agents in hospitals, spaces once associated with care and neutrality, now transformed into sites of surveillance and terror.

Last words

The intersection of motherhood and activism in post-revolutionary Iran demonstrates how intimate loss can become a catalyst for political transformation. The Mothers for Justice exemplify how maternal grief is reworked into a public and insurgent form of mourning that resists erasure. Private suffering is transformed into a collective ethical and political practice through which women emerge as moral witnesses to state violence and custodians of memory. This article has argued that their activism extends a genealogy of maternal protest from the early Islamic Republic to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, recasting motherhood from a domestic and moral role into a site of resistance and historical agency.

Through the lens of subjectivation theory, the study shows how public mourning reconfigures the meaning of motherhood itself. By testifying, remembering, and demanding justice, these mothers challenge state-sanctioned narratives of martyrdom and piety, constructing a counter-subjectivity that resists both patriarchal and theocratic power. Their grief thus becomes not only a form of testimony, but also a source of political agency that contests official histories and reclaims moral authority. Across regions marked by layered marginalization, including Kurdistan, Baluchestan, and Khuzestan, and among religious minorities such as Bahá'ís, Christians, Sunnis, and Sufis, maternal agency reveals its intersectional depth. In these contexts, mourning operates as a connective force that binds diverse struggles into a shared resistance against gendered, ethnic, and sectarian hierarchies. The maternal body itself becomes both archive and instrument, a living site where suffering and defiance intersect.

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48Lynv1SttQ> , <https://rasterverkosto.wordpress.com/2026/01/22/the-mobile-rings-in-the-pockets-of-the-dead-parents-calling-their-children/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DT6EcvLifrS/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DTfg43MDY4W/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DTp48EXCjjo/>

⁴⁹ <https://rasterverkosto.wordpress.com/2026/01/22/the-mobile-rings-in-the-pockets-of-the-dead-parents-calling-their-children/>

Through collective mourning, women forge solidarities that transcend difference, articulating a feminist ethics of care and resilience grounded in everyday experiences of repression.

This study's primary contribution is to theorize politicized mourning as a recursive process of political subjectivation through which grief generates new political subjects and sustains collective forms of agency and resilience under authoritarian conditions. It shows how mourning functions as a performative and affective practice that mobilizes resistance, reshapes the boundaries of political belonging, and transforms private loss into public claims-making. In this process, women emerge as central agents of historical rearticulation, redefining motherhood as a mode of political participation. By foregrounding grief as a generative force, the study highlights mourning not as an endpoint of violence, but as an ongoing practice through which alternative political imaginaries and durable forms of collective life are forged.

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