WLUML
Women Living Under Muslim Laws

RIDING TO FREEDOM

Women and Bicycling in the Muslim Contexts

Edited by Homa Hoodfar and Dana Kamour

Riding to Freedom: Women and Bicycling in the Muslim Contexts

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First Edition: 2025

Published by:
Women Living Under Muslim Laws
London, UK
wluml@wluml.org
www.wluml.org

AND

Asia Coordination Office
Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre
PO Box 5192, Lahore
Pakistan
Email: sgah@sgah.org.pk
Website: www.shirkatgah.org

Proofreading, Page-making, and Design: Maira Asif

Watermark image source: DALL-E AI Generated

ISBN: 978-1-907024-25-2

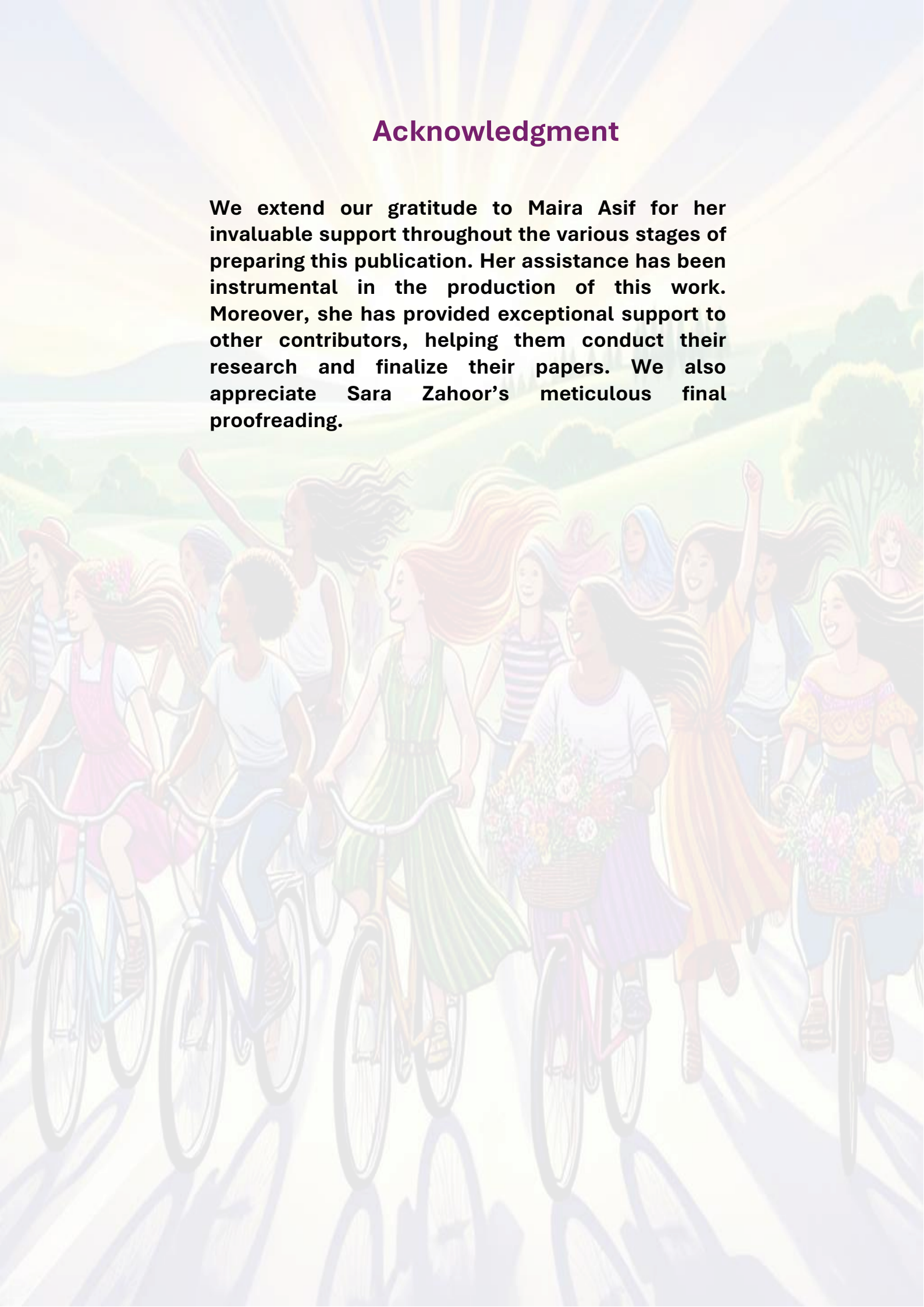
Kindle: 978-1-907024-26-9

Dedication

To the fearless women cyclists of Afghanistan, who ride against the tides of oppression, challenging the Taliban and the mindset of inequality with every turn of their wheels. Your unwavering spirit is a beacon of hope and resistance, keeping the struggle against gender apartheid alive on the global stage. And to every woman who has fought tirelessly to reclaim her rightful place in the world—your courage reshapes history and inspires us all.

Acknowledgment

We extend our gratitude to Maira Asif for her invaluable support throughout the various stages of preparing this publication. Her assistance has been instrumental in the production of this work. Moreover, she has provided exceptional support to other contributors, helping them conduct their research and finalize their papers. We also appreciate Sara Zahoor's meticulous final proofreading.



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- **ABC Check** - Air, Brakes, Chain (bicycle maintenance check)
- **BAME** - Black, Asian Minority Ethnic
- **BBC** - British Broadcasting Corporation
- **BRT** - Bus Rapid Transit
- **CNIC** - Computerized National Identity Card
- **CVD** - Cardiovascular Disease
- **DHA** - Defence Housing Authority
- **EU** - European Union
- **FWBR** - Fancy Women Bike Ride
- **IOC** - International Olympic Committee
- **IRNA** - Islamic Republic News Agency
- **ISNA** - Iranian Students' News Agency
- **KPK** - Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- **NATO** - North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- **NCSW** - National Commission on the Status of Women
- **PSLM** - Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement
- **SSF** - Salman Sufi Foundation
- **TfL** - Transport for London
- **UCI** - Union Cycliste Internationale
- **UN** - United Nations
- **UNDP** - United Nations Development Programme
- **UNESCO** - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- **UNFCCC** - United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
- **UNHCR** - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- **WLUML** - Women Living Under Muslim Laws

Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes
Transnational Feminist Solidarity Network

About Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is a transnational Feminist solidarity network and a think tank dedicated to sound research for advocacy. Its mission is to effectively advance women's equality, gender justice, and women's human rights through a variety of channels: providing information, research and analysis, publication and diverse media, training workshops and conferences, as well as facilitating a transnational and intergenerational collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned, or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.

The network started in 1984 by nine women from Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who came together and formed the Action Committee of Women Living Under Muslim Laws in support of local women's struggles. Since then, WLUML has linked individual women and organisations, and now extends to more than 70 countries, ranging from South Africa to Uzbekistan, Senegal to Indonesia, and Brazil to France. It links:

- Women living in countries or states where Islam is the state religion, secular states with Muslim majorities as well as those from Muslim communities governed by minority religious laws.
- Women in secular states where political groups are demanding religious laws; women in migrant Muslim communities in Europe, the Americas and around the world.
- Non-Muslim women who may have Muslim laws applied to them directly or through their children.
- Women born into Muslim communities/families who are automatically categorised as Muslim but may not define themselves as such, either because they are not believers or because they choose not to identify themselves in religious terms, preferring to prioritise other aspects of their identity such as political ideology, profession, sexual orientation or others.

WLUML's Mission and Vision:

Our mission is to empower women in their individual and collective struggles for equality and human rights, particularly in Muslim contexts. We achieve this by breaking isolation, offering training, and fostering spaces where women can connect with one another within and across Muslim contexts, and globally with feminist and human rights platforms to share experiences and provide mutual support.

What is in the Name:

Our name challenges the myth of one, homogenous 'Muslim world'. This deliberately created myth fails to reflect that laws said to be Muslim vary from one context to another. The laws that determine our lives are from diverse sources: religious, customary, colonial and secular. Many different laws simultaneously govern us including formal laws recognized by the state (codified and uncodified) and informal laws such as customary practises, which vary according to the cultural, social and political context.

WLUML, as a network, has opted for an open structure which has been designed to maximise the participation of diverse and autonomous groups and individuals as well as collective decision-making. WLUML does not have formal membership, and networkers are a

fluid group of individuals and organisations who maintain regular two-way contact with the network. For more information, please see the WLUML website at www.wluml.org.

Publications, Research, and Media:

WLUML conducts research, develops analyses, and mobilizes knowledge through training workshops, conferences, and campaigns. It circulates information about women's varied experiences and strategies in Muslim contexts, while also demystifying the many sources of control over women's lives. Additionally, WLUML runs the **Feminist Leadership Institute** for women in Muslim contexts.

Currently, WLUML focuses on four key themes:

1. Fundamentalism and Identity Politics
2. Peacebuilding and Resisting the Impact of Militarization on Women's Lives
3. Promoting and Protecting Women's Equality Under Laws, particularly constitutional Equality and Family Laws
4. Ending Gender Apartheid
5. Eradication of Violence Against Women (particularly legal violence)
6. Women and Electoral Politics (including violence against women politicians)
7. Sexuality and Women's Bodily Autonomy
8. Dress Code and Modes
9. Reclaiming Public Spaces
10. Women's Sport as a Political Space and Contestation

Violence against Women is a cross-cutting theme present in all of WLUML's projects and activities. WLUML's publications, primarily available in English, French, and Arabic (with some in other local languages based on need assessments and requests from activists), are freely accessible on the website at www.wluml.org. Networkers often translate these materials into additional languages. Printed versions of selected publications are also available, including some listed on Amazon and other online bookstores.

Collective, Multi-cultural, Multi-country Research for Advocacy and Training Projects, and Coalition for Establishing and Promoting Advocacy for Women's Human Rights:

- Exchange Programme (1988)
- Mothers of Algiers (1987–1993)
- Qur'anic Interpretations Meetings (1990–2004)
- Women and Law in the Muslim World Programme (1991–2001)
- Women's Reproductive Rights (1993–1998)
- Vienna Tribunal Campaign: Women's Rights are Human Rights (1991–1995)
- Transformative Feminist Leadership institute previously ran under the name of Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes (1998, 1999, 2007, 2009, 2011,2013, 2015, 2017, 2024)
- Gender, Militarization, and Displacement in Muslim Contexts (1999–2002)
- Initiative for Democratizing Afghan Family Laws – INSAF (2002–2010)
- Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts (2003–Present)
- The International Coalition on Women Human Rights Defenders www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org (2005–Present)
- The Feminist Dialogue www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org (2006–Present)

- The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women! (2007–Present)
- Violence is Not Our Culture Campaign www.violenceisnotourculture.org (2009–2017)
- Women Reclaiming and Redefining Cultures: Asserting Rights Over Body, Self, and Public Spaces (2008–2011) https://www.wluml.org/2021/01/25/about-wrrc-work-on-violence-against-women-vnc-campaign/
- Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratization (2012–2017) https://www.wluml.org/project/weldd/
- Violence is not Our Culture: The Continuous Feminist Revolution (campaign 2007) https://www.wluml.orgproject/weldd/
- Violence is not Our Culture: The Continuous Feminist Revolution (campaign 2007) https://www.wluml.orgproject/weldd/
- Women and Safe Public Spaces (2018–Present) https://www.wluml.org/project/reclaimingpublicspaces/
- Constitutionalizing Women's Rights (2020–Present) https://www.wluml.org/2024/04/21/publication-announcement-women-and-constitutions-in-muslim-contexts-edited-by-vrinda-narain-and-mona-tajali/
- No Peace Without Women 's Right in Afghanistan, https://www.wluml.org/2021/01/31/flyer-english-
- Naming and Endling Gender Apartheid (2023-present) https://www.wluml.org/?s=gender+Apartheid

About Shirkat Gah

Shirkat Gah is a women's resource centre in Pakistan, established in 1975 by a group of seven like-minded women. It was founded as a resource and publication centre committed to promoting gender equality and improving women's economic, health, and reproductive rights, political participation, legal rights, and social development. It carries out research for advocacy and engages in policy dialogues with the government. The organization collaborates with other like-minded national and transnational organisations. Since 1987, it has been a close partner of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and a key partner in all of WLUML's collective research and advocacy projects.

Shirkat Gah works from the grassroots to the government and international arenas, supporting men, women, girls, youth, and the transgender community in promoting human rights for all. It creates momentum for a violence-free, gender-equal, and inclusive future. It nurtures feminist thinking and leadership, builds local, national, and transnational connections, and fosters solidarity and a sense of collectivity within the communities it serves. The organisation also mobilises male allies to support women and girls in their struggle to challenge the structural and systemic obstacles they face in both public and private spheres.

Shirkat Gah helps women and girls acquire knowledge, skills, and know-how to access existing rights and services, empowering them to be self-advocates for the changes they wish to see. Through its projects and interventions, the organisation creates platforms for marginalised voices to be heard, offering opportunities for them to exercise agency in political and public processes and decision-making. It supports mobilised communities in identifying and overcoming obstacles through their own ideas and strategies.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)
International Coordination Office
London UK
Email: wluml@wluml.org
Website: www.wluml.org

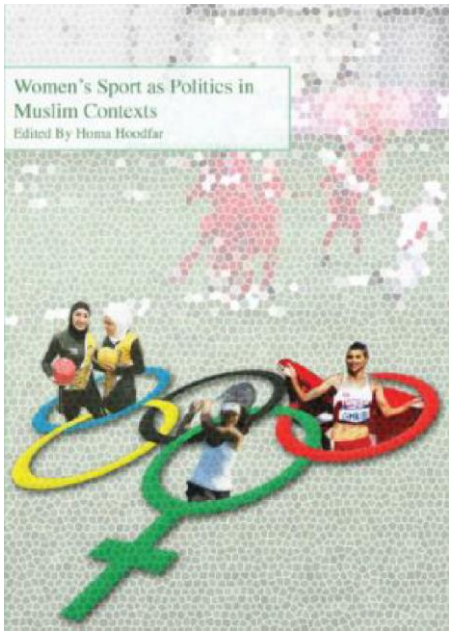
Asia Coordination Office
Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre
PO Box 5192, Lahore
Pakistan
Email: sgah@sgah.org.pk
Website: www.shirkatgah.org

WLUML Women Reclaiming and Redefining Public Spaces Programme

Access to public spaces as a matter of course for women and men is a significant reflection of gender practices and the degree of gender equality in a given society. Since the presence of women in public spaces is to varying degrees limited in most societies, women's public presence has both symbolic and actual value, indicating flexibility, openness, 'tolerance' and democratization, particularly in many Muslim contexts, where public spaces have been assumed to be primarily male spaces. Women have learned through centuries of struggle that public visibility is the first step in establishing their rights as citizens. Thus, since the early twentieth century women have been contesting their limited access to public spaces and taking steps to claim their rightful place in public arenas.

In many post-colonial Muslim and non-Muslim contexts constituencies of women politicized in the course of anti-colonial movements demanded access to public space, pushed for refashioning women's roles and for their incorporation in public life. To varying degrees, the newly established states supported these demands on the assumption that modernity required women's presence in public life. However, since the end of 1970s with the ascendance of political Islamist to state power, sexual politics has emerged more pronouncedly at the centre of debate on women's rights in everyday matters. From Algeria to Egypt, Nigeria, Iran, and even Indonesia and Malaysia, where historically women enjoyed significant freedom of movement and access to the public sphere, conservatives and political Islamists claim religious dictates require the exclusion of women from public space and the imposition of restrictive dress codes and gender roles. It is in this context that WLUML, at the behest of its networkers, launched this collective research on various forms violence and harassment of women in public spaces.

The current publication, *Riding to Freedom: Women Cyclists Reclaiming Public Space in Muslim Contexts,* is the result of the dedicated efforts of our networkers and research fellows to redefine public spaces. Previously, WLUML published *Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts* (read more below).



Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts
Edited by Homa Hoodfar (2015)
http://www.wluml.org/resource/womens-sport-politics-muslimcontexts

In many Muslim contexts, dress code and obscenification of women's bodies has been used as a tool to exclude women from the public life and public spaces. This volume, through focused case studies, tracks the many sophisticated, context-specific, and constantly evolving strategies of resistance deployed by women to overcome the social and legal barriers that intend to exclude them from public life including sport both as players and spectators. The edited volume evinces the various ways women negotiate political and ideological boundaries as they politicize and subvert spaces normally considered outside the realm of state politics in order to bring about gender equitable opportunities while at the same time redefining women's roles in society. In short, the book provides a glimpse of the variety of ways that women debunk exclusionary masculinist logics in sports that are justified by nationalism, religion, and modernism. Hoodfar and her colleagues contribute a ground-breaking analysis of the landscape of gender and sport in diverse Muslim contexts, covering Saudi Arabia, Iran, UK, Europe and North America, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Senegal.

About the Contributors

Adısönmez, Setenay Mutlu

Setenay is an international evaluation consultant and independent researcher providing consultancy services to UN agencies, civil society organizations, think tanks, and private research companies. Her research focuses on monitoring gender equality and women's rights within formal and informal civil society organizations, including social movements, volunteer organizations, membership organizations, and NGOs. She holds a Master of Science in Gender Studies from Lund University (Sweden) and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Bilkent University (Türkiye).

Asif, Maira

Maira is currently a research consultant working on interdisciplinary work across gender, climate change, and human rights. After completing her Masters in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Rutgers University, USA, as a Fulbright Scholar, Maira is currently working with feminist and development circles in Pakistan and globally on gender equality through research, training facilitation, and advocacy. She is also a member of the International Council, Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

Basmechi, Farinaz

Farinaz is a dedicated scholar in Feminist and Gender Studies at the University of Ottawa. She specializes in gender and sexuality, collective behavior and social movements, content analysis, and digital media. Her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals like Sociological Spectrum and First Monday. She contributed a book chapter titled "The Iranian #MeToo Movement" to The Other #MeToos, part of the Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations series.

Cho, Yaewon (Claire)

Yaewon Cho, from South Korea, is a current student at Hankuk Academy of Foreign Studies. She has been passionate about voicing the rights of women in the Middle East through both social activism and research.

Ebnenasir, Ghazaleh

Ghazaleh is an Iranian student residing in the United States. Born in Isfahan, Iran, she holds a bachelor's degree in law from the Islamic Azad University of Isfahan and is pursuing a master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of North Texas. Her research interests include culture, politics, religion, human rights, and women's rights.

Hoodfar, Homa

Homa is a Professor of Anthropology, Emerita, at Concordia University, Montreal. Describing herself as an academic in the service of civil society, she has been involved in Women Living Under Muslim Laws since the 1980s. Her research focuses on the anthropology of political economy, reproductive rights, gender and citizenship, and the public sphere in Muslim contexts.

Hussain, Anniesa

Anniesa holds an MSc in International Relations & Global Issues from the University of Nottingham. In addition to working in corporate communications, she is an independent researcher focusing on peacebuilding and religious minority rights, primarily raising awareness of persecuted minority groups in conservative Islamic contexts. She has also worked with youth and women-led grassroots and civil society movements.

Kamour, Dana

Dana is a feminist with experience in non-profit project coordination and delivery. She joined WLUML in 2021 for a research internship analyzing the Taliban's political messaging regarding women and minority rights. She now coordinates programmes and publications and co-forms WLUML's Digital Communications team. Her current role involves refugee resettlement in the UK, focusing on strengthening organized routes to safety through sponsorship.

Khan, Iqra

Iqra completed her LLB (Hons.) from the University of London in 2022. Her final year research focused on reforming rape laws in Pakistan. She currently works as a junior legal counsel at Lahore University of Management Sciences. Her professional interests include family law, constitutional law, public interest litigation, and corporate law.

Khan, Rida

Rida is pursuing a degree in Social Development and Policy from Habib University in Karachi, Pakistan. Her research explores the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity, focusing on the identity of Pashtun women through a post-colonial queer lens. She is deeply involved in grassroots feminist movements, including the Aurat March and Progressive Students Federation.

Syed, Itrath

Itrath teaches Women's Studies/Social Justice courses at Langara College. She has a BA from Simon Fraser University in History, Political Science, and Women's Studies, and an MA in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of British Columbia. She is pursuing a PhD exploring the tensions between Islamophobia, belonging, and identity for Muslims in Canada.

Foreword

Claiming Public Spaces: Women Push the Wheel of Change Forward

Access to safe public spaces is fundamental to women's rights. These spaces—where people gather, work, and move—must be inclusive and accessible to everyone, regardless of gender. For women, the ability to walk, cycle, drive, or use public transport without fear of harassment is more than just a convenience—it is a crucial aspect of their freedom and autonomy. Safe public spaces enable women to participate fully in social, economic, and political life, allowing them to commute, attend school, engage in community activities, and simply enjoy their cities. When women can move freely, they are empowered to contribute more actively to society, reinforcing their sense of belonging and equality.

To enhance safety in public spaces, women have employed various strategies. Women's groups organise collective walks and bicycle rides, creating a visible presence that challenges societal norms restricting their freedom. These collective actions promote solidarity and assert that public spaces belong to everyone. Additionally, women use social media to raise awareness about harassment and share safety tips. This digital activism fosters a sense of community, empowering women to speak out against abuse and cultivating a culture of accountability and respect. Despite these efforts, much remains to be desired in public safety.

Women also advocate for urban planning improvements, such as well-lit streets, accessible transportation, and public facilities designed with safety in mind. They push for laws that protect women and demand training for lawmakers and police to ensure safety for all, particularly women and youth. By engaging with local governments and community leaders, they work to implement policies and infrastructure that prioritise women's safety. Women are not merely hoping for change—they are taking action to ensure that political will supports their demands.

Cycling stands out for its practicality, affordability, and environmental benefits. Yet, in many West Asian countries, women cyclists face significant challenges, even in the absence of legal restrictions. They often encounter resistance from their families, and even if they overcome this barrier, they are subjected to verbal and physical harassment on the roads. In countries like Iran, authorities target women cyclists under the guise of protecting culture and religion. This reflects a broader pattern in which fathers, brothers, husbands, and the state assert control over women's bodies. This control is further rationalized by invoking cultural and religious norms, effectively treating women as property of these entities.

In response, many women have intensified their efforts to reclaim public spaces. This book is a direct response to the numerous young women who have sought support from WLUML for these initiatives. Dr. Hanieh Molana, a geographer from California State University, enthusiastically joined us to launch the cycling project. Unfortunately, due to health reasons, she had to withdraw. I hope she will be pleased to know that the work continued and culminated in the completion of this book. Despite our limited resources, and through the dedicated efforts of many within our network—particularly Maira Asif—we present this book as a tribute to all the courageous women who confront hostile public spaces and rightfully reclaim them.

Homa Hoodfar
Montreal
Summer 2024

Introduction: Cycling as an Instrument of Social Change

Homa Hoodfar and Dana Kamour

The bicycle as we recognise it today is 207 years old. In its relatively short lifetime, it has had many names – it is both a 'silent steed' and the 'Devil's two-wheeler'. It has been championed for bringing health, freedom, and joy. And it has been accused of many moral crimes – lessening fertility, pelvic stimulation, and the corruption of women's souls. The morality of bicycles and the women who ride them continues to be argued over. Yet, it is undeniable that the bicycle has been a significant instrument in securing women's mobility, freedom, and normalising their access to public space. This was no less true in 1800s Britain and America, where it was invented and developed (Macy 2011), than in the streets of globalised Western cities and many Muslim-majority states today. Indeed, the debates in many Muslim contexts closely resemble those described by Sue Macy in her brief, engaging, and beautifully illustrated book **Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way*) *. Macy's account highlights the social obstacles that early pioneer women cyclists in the USA faced as men and establishments of the time used religion and pseudo-science to restrict women's cycling. For similar reasons, the humble bicycle remains a focal point for many women activists in Muslim-majority societies, who have mobilised through cycling to safeguard and expand their rights. The chapters in this volume offer a long-overdue investigation into women's demands for the recognition of their right to cycle safely in public spaces.

Women's exclusion from public space – in terms of physical location and socially defined in terms of public visibility and consciousness – is historic and systemic in most societies, not least in Muslim contexts and states. When women do access public space, it has both a symbolic value, signalling openness, equality, and societal democratisation, as well as a practical impact on women's realisation of their citizenry rights. The earlier volume **Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts** (2015) edited by Hoodfar, published by WLUML, presented the pivotal role that sport has played in securing women's access to public space as well as, crucially, how women have been the agents of this change. Aware of the significance of their visibility in the sporting arena in the defence of their rights, various chapters in the book demonstrate the many ways women have actively used participation in sports to loosen restrictions on dress codes, mobility, and societal roles.

In Muslim societies, as in Western societies, religious and conservative forces have condemned the impact of sport on society's morality. It is women who bear the brunt of these fears and systemic suppression. They believe a woman should not play sport or ride a bicycle because the movement and clothing will call into question her modesty and family respectability; they assume a woman should not cycle because she will not be safe in public from male strangers, nor can her safety or chastity be assured; they fear a woman riding a bicycle because they incorrectly – though deliberately promoted by those who do not want to see women on bicycles – believe the movement risks her reproductive health, threatening her position in society as a mother. In reality, however, the establishment and men in the seat of power and privilege fear a woman cycling because a successful challenge to male privilege in one public arena risks crumbling their privilege and power in other public and even private spheres, and indeed, it might, as we have seen in many societies. It can bring about independence and mobility and break away the control of patriarchal communities over women, in particular young women. However, the question for many women is why they should accept these deliberate acts of control. Two centuries after the bicycle's invention, women in many societies, particularly in Muslim contexts continue to face these limitations, to the detriment of communities as a whole. In the twentieth century, political tensions arising from social change as a consequence of modernisation and the formation of the modern state in many Muslim societies on the one hand, and the desire of conservative forces to protect traditional culture on the other, have created major social and legal tensions. A major part of this tension is focused on gender norms and the

control of women's mobility, their bodies, and minds, through erecting social and legal obstacles. Thus, women's engagement in politics, education, sport, and in particular, riding bicycles, has largely remained hostage to conservatives and their influence on the political structure of nations.

At the same time, the newly formed independent nation-states promoted sporting activities to signal the modernisation trend to the public at home and powers abroad. However, with the spread of political Islam ideology from the 1970s onwards and the transformation into a social force, conservative elements in many Muslim-majority societies began insisting on women's traditional gender roles limiting their public opportunities. To appease these forces, many states softened their policies on opportunities for women—a trend that intensified after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In the process, women gained relative advancement in sport and other public spheres. This state of affairs slowed women's advancement and, in some contexts, such as Iran, completely reversed many of the rights women had secured step by step. The Islamist parties derive their legitimacy and power from restricted readings of Islamic texts. In their imagined past, before 'the corrupting' influence of Western imperialism, a woman's place in society was restricted to caregiver and motherhood. Under this perspective, women's societal role, dress, modesty, and public visibility became politicised and restricted. In this process, the use of a bicycle became increasingly gendered. Both material investment from state funding and the ideological legitimacy for women's exercise outside of the home were withdrawn (Hoodfar 2015). It is in these ideological contexts, as described in different chapters in this volume, that women cyclists in Muslim contexts are contending and contesting the limitations placed on them.

The chapters in this volume interrogate the contemporary landscape for women cyclists in Muslim contexts, the strategies women have employed to realise their rights, and the impact of these cycling initiatives on women's individual and collective freedoms. Common obstacles and sites of contestation emerge from their comparative reading. Possibly the most significant inhibitive factor to women cycling cited was harassment and the fear of harassment by male strangers, disapproving community members, lack of state protection to make the public space safe, and worse – in some contexts like Iran – the state actively restricts women's use of bicycles by calling it un-Islamic. Indeed, although women have finally established that there are no Islamic restrictions on women riding bicycles, some conservative Islamic leaders continue to insist that bicycles bring about immoralities, almost mirroring what went on in the USA at the turn of the 20th century. For instance, the Isfahan Office of Fiqh and Islamic Instruction, in a long-published article, announced that the expansion of women's cycling has caused immorality and it should be restricted.[1] These ideological approaches, presented in the guise of religion, encourage men to take it upon themselves to make public spaces unsafe for women. A woman alone in public spaces, implicitly designated as male space, risks her perceived physical safety as well as her social safety by ruining her reputation, as Chapter 5 on the situation of women cyclists in Afghanistan indicates. They faced not just abusive words but also physical harm, while their families had to endure the scorn and contempt of their communities.

Another obstacle commonly faced by women cyclists is the entrenched framing of women cycling as an influence of imperial and corrupting Western legacy – something that does not apply to men! This allegation increased danger to many female cyclists in Afghanistan, forcing some into exile under threats to their lives by the Taliban, even before they took power. As discussed in Chapter 5, with the return of the Taliban to power, many of the known 220 women

[1]Iranhumanrights.org. (2019). *Isfahan Prosecutor Bans "Sinful Act" of Women Riding Bicycles*. https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/05/isfahan-prosecutor-bans-sinful-act-of-women-riding-bicycles/ (accessed July 31, 2023).

cyclists, including members of the national Afghanistan team, had to go into hiding and exile, as they were deemed immoral and unsafe under the Taliban's rule.

Le chalet du Cycle, JeanBeraud,1895

Women have resoundingly won the Islamic arguments – Islam promotes and celebrates women's health, and at its inception, Islamic teachings took no issue with women riding animals, therefore could have cultural precedence that continue to be relied upon by conservative forces. Women's bodily autonomy has proven the most delicate and contradictory site of contestation. On the one hand, public cycling initiatives can make women more visible and actively reclaim their share of public spaces that had been male dominated. Clothing adapted to cycling can assist the depoliticization of women's bodies and expand women's choice of dress and self-actualisation. However, just as women adjusted their 19th-century impractical clothing with more bicycle-friendly designs such as the Bloomer, several adjustments were adopted to initiate women's cycling in many Muslim societies – such as highlighting modest dress, seat adaptations to 'preserve modesty', promotion of bicycles as environmentally friendly, and women-only rides. Yet they are not always successful in challenging the ideological underpinnings of objections that aim to keep women out of the public sphere and deny them autonomy in their movement.

Equally, it is important to note that there is no homogenous Muslim experience, as Ghazaleh Ebnenasir's reflection (Chapter 6) in this volume on women's use of the bicycle in Iran, Indonesia, and Malaysia makes clear. And, within societies, the experiences of women vary greatly depending on the cultural context, family's social position, economic pressures, and the rural/urban divide.

In this volume, for illustration, Iqra Khan, Rida Khan, and Maira Asif untwine the multiple and sometimes conflicting elements that determine woman's experience in modern Pakistan. While the state now is encouraging women's organizations' push to bring women on the streets through cycling, religious and cultural elements pose insurmountable challenges still and Pakistani streets remain male-dominated. Nonetheless, despite different contexts, we know that learning from common challenges strengthens and makes women's struggles more effective in reclaiming their autonomy and citizenship rights. (Chapters 2 and 3)

There is similarly significant value in identifying the successful strategies used by women cyclists to reclaim public spaces. Women have been agents of change by strategizing to challenge the ideological and theological arguments against women's cycling, such as through the activist-led public intellectual debates in 1990s Iran, and by physically altering the social geography of busy streets through collective bicycle rallies, such as those organised by Aurat March, Pink Riders, Girls at Dhaba, and Lyari Girls Café in Pakistan.

Women-led initiatives such as Cycle Sisters in London, UK, by Anniesa (Chapter 8), and Fancy Women Bike Rides in İzmir, Turkey, by Setenay Mutlu, have spread to other cities, demonstrating how the models can be replicated and their effects propagated. Characteristics common to such movements explored in this volume include participation across generations, the use of social media to reimagine and redefine public spaces, and the fostering of sisterhood alongside individual confidence. The effects of cycling as a group with other women should not

be underestimated. It is clear from the testimonies included that cycling groups have fostered and strengthened solidarity between individual women, multiplying the material, mental, and emotional resources needed to make change in society. We hope many more collective rides form by women, particularly in contexts where women continue to face hurdles riding their bicycles.

Women cyclists in many Muslim-majority countries have had significant success gaining societal acceptance by tying women's cycling together with governments' existing environmental agendas. In this volume, Farinaz Basmechi cites how women politicians in Iran coupled arguments for women's cycling and health with concerns over air pollution in cities. At the provincial level, women mobilised around 'Car-Free Tuesdays' to promote environmental awareness, adding legitimacy to their demands as well as offering the regime a face-saving solution. (Chapter 1) Setenay Mutlu Adisönmez describes how in Turkey, the Fancy Women Bike Ride (FWBR) is organised annually on World Car-Free Tuesdays. Now cycling in 200 cities worldwide, FWBR participants pair women's public visibility with demands for improved local, environmentally friendly infrastructure. (Chapter 4)

Similarly, women cyclists have harnessed governmental and international organisations' socio-economic goals. The UN champions the bicycle as a tool for sustainable development, to simultaneously achieve economic growth, reduce inequalities, and act against climate change (UN World Bicycle Day adopted on the 72nd of the United Nations General Assembly). Significantly, FWBR gained further legitimacy and publicity after the organisers were awarded the UN Special Award for World Bicycle Day 2022. And Women on Wheels Pakistan, the subject of Maira Asif's case study, combined government and business stakeholder interests by connecting trained women to potential employers, resulting in 30% of the trainees entering the workforce. (Chapter 3) The bicycle – by providing a cost-effective, environmentally friendly mode of personal transport – has multiplied women's confidence, financial independence, and opportunities to venture into the public sphere and spaces.

Claire Cho presents how Syrian women, who have faced over a decade of civil war, bringing hardship and insecurity to society, took to riding bicycles to commute to work and university. (Chapter 7) They persisted despite initial street harassment. Today, most people, at least in urban areas, have accepted the presence of female cyclists.[2] The cyclist women have also connected with Lebanese and other women from the region, organising cycling marches across villages and cities to advocate for peace. Through cycling, they not only advocate for peace but also transform the war and insecurity into an opportunity for women to assert their presence in public spaces.

The research in this volume celebrates the many women cyclists in Muslim contexts who realise that cycling beyond the individual benefit is an arena of social change and struggle to break away from restricted and limited options open to women and girls. But the legacy of cycling for societal change goes back much further. We were inspired by Macy's (2011) exploration of pioneering women cyclists at the turn of 20th-century America. As mentioned earlier *Wheels of Change* colourfully captures the adventure, daring, and passion of the early pioneer women cyclists. Just as today, women pushed back against moral, pseudo-health, and religious arguments against women cycling, designed to keep women in their limited existing roles within the private and domestic spheres. And in doing so, they expanded this role to sportswomen, celebrities, and public figures. They broke the restrictive dress code that confined women's bodies and the social mores that said a woman could not travel or enter the public sphere alone. The cultural landscape was also transformed as women racing in bloomer trousers were

[2] Although it remains to be seen, now (in December 2024) that the secularist regime of Assad has fallen and a coalition of Islamists has taken over the state, whether women can continue to cycle in public spaces.

depicted in print and bright advertising. The same fervour of a woman who has newly discovered cycling shines through the testimonies of women from Muslim contexts today.

This volume is divided into two parts. The first considers women-prompted change and obstacles to women's cycling at the local, regional, and national levels. Farinaz Basmechi explores the fragile arguments against women's cycling in Iran and the efforts made by women at these levels to resist the authorities' restrictions. Iqra Khan, Rida Khan, and Maira Asif conducted research with university students in Pakistan's cities to understand the most significant barriers to using two-wheelers and the factors determining the choice of transport. They found gender plays a pivotal role, but that gender disparity varies based on context and city, and this disparity has been reduced by women's cycling rallies and initiatives aimed at making the presence of women cyclists in public spaces. Maira Asif presents *Women on Wheels* (WoW) as a successful case study; motorcycling initiatives like WoW have been replicated and adapted to promote women's freedom and opportunities across Pakistan.

The second part considers women-led action that has brought change at a personal and societal level. Setenay Mutlu Adisönmez shows how *Fancy Women Bike Rides* has had a global impact and serves as an important model for future movements increasing women's access to public space. Anniesa Hussein connects the Cycle Sisters, London, to the wider movement of British Muslim women of South Asian origin cycling with confidence and support from their community. Ghazaleh Ebnenasir compares the legal and cultural restrictions on women's cycling in Iran with the comparative freedom of women cyclists in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, challenging the legal and religious basis for Iran's restrictions. Finally, we follow Itrath Syed through her personal journey with her bicycle. She shares how her love of cycling is closely connected to her love for her father, and how both gave her the gifts of freedom, confidence, and joy.

Homa Hoodfar briefly outlines the heroic initiatives of women in Afghanistan to learn and ride their bicycles in defiance of their very conservative communities and often their families. They participate in public national competitions to showcase women's ability in sports and cycling in Afghanistan's conservative society. Having worked hard towards establishing cycling as an acceptable sport for women—at least among young people—they developed small teams and a national team that participated in several Asian and international competitions. Unfortunately, they had to flee the country once the Taliban came to power after the disgraceful departure of the USA and international forces, as it was clear that with their extreme fundamentalist understanding of Islam, they would not be tolerant of women cycling. Indeed, since their return to power in 2021, the Taliban have banned girls from education beyond primary school (Grade 6), prohibited women's sports, barred women from entering parks, and imposed long-distance travel restrictions without a mahram (close male family member). Yet the women cyclists have not given up. They have worked hard to connect across the many countries they have been somewhat randomly distributed in as refugees and to participate in various competitions to represent women from Afghanistan. Their spirit of resistance and struggle for gender equality continues to inspire women across many Muslim societies and beyond. These women live as a visible symbol of hope for other young women from Afghanistan. Through their tenacious work, three women represented Afghanistan in the Olympics 2024 in Paris.

This volume does not explore the experiences of women cyclists from Egypt and many other North African and Asian countries. We hope in the future we can provide a more encompassing overview of women cycling and public discourses around it in Muslim contexts. We are especially disheartened not to have a write-up on Palestinian and Sudanese women, as the ongoing wars have interrupted their struggle to redefine public space. Palestinian riding

projects and the expansion of public space for women have been disrupted by wars, particularly the current unbelievably cruel and inhuman Gaza war (2023–2024). Sudanese women, who have shown considerable strength in shifting societal expectations around women, sports, and cycling, are now dealing with the brutal civil war which has forced millions of people inside and outside Sudan. We hope that when the civil war ends, women will once again continue to open spaces for women in all public spheres, particularly in public spaces. Before the civil war transformed Sudan's urban centres into war zones, local initiatives, including *My Bicycle for Me* and Sudanese Female Cyclists, mobilised and trained thousands of women in Khartoum and Omdurman. Parallels can be drawn with the movements discussed in Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran, as women pushed through street harassment to build solidarity, confidence, and reclaim public space for women. Unquestionably, there are several empty spaces within this collection that we hope will be filled by future contributions from women in other Muslim contexts and societies.

Throughout the volume, the uniqueness of the bicycle as a multi-dimensional vehicle for social change has become apparent. Cycling, unlike other forms of transport or physical activity, offers deeply felt, although sometimes intangible, advantages. Learning to ride a bicycle presents a skill to be mastered – doing so fosters self-reliance and self-trust. Riding a bicycle puts miles between a woman and her home – she has the possibility to explore new environments and, on this vehicle all of her own, she has the unprecedented opportunity for self-exploration and actualisation. Riding a bicycle is exhilarating – she moves faster and beyond typical limitations. And riding a bicycle requires physical work and deepened breath – developing physical and mental strength. The bicycle, therefore, offers a cyclical and compounding effect. Greater confidence and economic opportunities lead to greater exercise of rights and visibility. Greater visibility has been shown over time to nurture societal acceptance, which in turn furthers confidence and opportunity. Along with riding the bicycle, public discussion on its merits and the importance of support from the public and the state's institutions for these initiatives at home and in diverse societies are important in opening the way for social change and for the promotion of gender equality. The papers in this volume are a contribution to these discussions, besides demonstrating that women cycling together can have profound political and societal implications, but also, no less significantly, showing how the bicycle has brought joy, adventure, connection, and fun.

Part One

Breaking Boundaries: Women Cyclists reclaiming Public Spaces

Chapter 1:

Pedalling Resistance: Reclaiming Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Iran

Farinaz Basmechi

Image from a 2-day women's road cycling competition in Imam Khomeini's holy shrine (Source: Jamaran News)

Introduction

In the ongoing pursuit of gender equality, ensuring women's equal access to public spaces is a foundational element of creating inclusive and progressive societies. Public spaces serve as dynamic hubs for social interactions, civic participation, and the overall well-being of communities. However, persistent gender disparities often limit women's ability to fully engage in these spaces, curbing their opportunities for personal growth and socio-economic advancement. Recognizing the importance of dismantling these barriers goes beyond a commitment to fairness; it is a fundamental step towards harnessing the collective potential of diverse perspectives, fostering a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can participate freely and contribute meaningfully to public life.

The extent of inequalities between women and men in a given society is largely determined by socially constructed gender roles and relations. These disparities are evident in the utilization and accessibility of public spaces, often placing women and girls at a disadvantage. The term "space" encompasses physical locations, time, and the freedom to think, act, and engage in activities such as sports. Achieving gender equality involves women freely accessing public spaces, whether open or covered, without it being perceived as a special privilege.

This holds true for women participating in sports, both as athletes and spectators. When women utilize public spaces for sports, it symbolizes flexibility, openness, tolerance, and the democratization of spaces traditionally considered male-dominated. In many societies especially in certain Muslim contexts, public spaces are often perceived as primarily belonging

to men. Ideally, women's access to sports spaces should involve equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and incentives for learning, practicing, and participating in sports and games (Hoodfar 2015).

Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, women's appearance in the public sphere has been policed, their bodies have become overly sexualized, their presence in the street as free active agents has been restricted, and many activities have been forbidden or become a matter of interrogation. Riding a bicycle is one of those issues that has escalated debates in the Iranian public forums. Even though it is not legally forbidden for women to ride a bike in public, many religious figures and clerics claim this is a haram act (religiously forbidden) since it can attract men's attention and cause them immoral thoughts. But this is not every cleric's perspective, and some of them stated that women can ride bicycles as long as they follow Sharia rules[3] and requirements. Although riding a bike is not legally forbidden because of various standpoints and claims from religious figures, in the past 43 years, Iranian women have faced paradoxical and arbitrary reactions towards their bike riding in public. For instance, for years every time they tried to organise a ride there were public disagreements, and many conservative newspapers attacked the idea.

Women did not passively accept these arbitrary decisions and resisted discriminatory non-written law enforcement. In this chapter I review Iranian women's resistance against enforcing powers that want to restrict their presence in public spheres at local, provincial, and national levels. In the first section I introduce the legal terms regarding women's cycling in Iran. Then, I discuss the efforts of women's politicians to promote women's equal right to access sport activities, specifically cycling. In addition, I discuss the clerics' point of view, which was mainly negative regarding women's cycling in the public sphere. Then I discuss the efforts taken place at the provincial level in municipalities of different cities in Iran and backlashes toward those plans will be discussed.

Next, the local grassroot resistances of Iranian women to acquire their rights to use bicycles in public spaces and their responses to the arbitrary religious conservative points of view will be presented. Despite various obstacles in the way of women's cycling in Iran after the 1979 revolution, because of the efforts of Iranian society at various levels – local, provincial, and national – the governmental system itself changed its standpoint toward this matter.

However, it is still important to promote discussions around women's equal rights to cycle and access to facilities in the public sphere without fear of being harassed by the police or any other person since it highlights the importance of taking back women's liberty to own their bodies, actions, and appearances in public and private spheres; to take their wheels of life back and repossess a ride to liberty.

Legal Terms Regarding Women Cycling in Iran

After the 1979 revolution, women's sports were placed at the centre of scrutiny of the conservative Islamic perspective precisely because of their presence before male eyes without proper outfits covering their bodies and hair from non-mahram males (men who are not part of close kin) in society. Therefore, female sports were suspended in the first decade of the Islamic Republic government. The main effort was to make women appear in public spheres obliging Islamic codes to preserve public chastity. Women's cycling also did not remain intact from the Islamic perspective. While there is no specific law banning women from cycling in public, Iranian women have faced some restrictions to bike, usually under the "public chastity law" (Massiah

[3] Sharia law can be defined as a path of behaviour that is believed to be divinely ordained, leading Muslims to actively manifest their religious beliefs in the present world and aiming for divine favour in the hereafter (Coulson & Shamy, 2023)

2016). Article 638 of the Islamic penal code, which is mainly concerned with public chastity, claims that:

> "Anyone who pretends to commit a haram act publicly in public places and on roads, in addition to the punishment of the act, will be sentenced to imprisonment from ten days to two months or up to (74) lashes, and if he commits an act that the act is not punishable, but if it damages public modesty, it will only be sentenced to imprisonment from ten days to two months or up to (74) lashes. Note- Women who appear without a religious hijab in the streets and public will be sentenced to imprisonment from ten days to two months or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred thousand Rials" (Article 638 of the Iran's Islamic Penal Code).

Since this article of the Islamic penal code is open to interpretation regarding the "haram" act, what can be considered public chastity, and what can damage it, many restrictions have been imposed on women's appearance and in public in various forms. According to the second leader of the Islamic Republic government, Ali Khamenei's, website: "In Islam, women have been prohibited from showing off their beauty in order to attract men or cause fitnah (social disorder, generally meaning that they arise sexual and immoral thought among men, who are viewed as unable to control themselves and their mind). Showing off one's physical attraction to men is a kind of fitnah, (sexual disorderly, chaos) and it can cause various problems" (Khamenei.ir 2010, para. 5). This perspective towards women's presence in public space created an even more hostile perspective regarding women's activities in public arenas in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Given the political repression, women have found new spaces of struggle by politicizing fields that, historically, were not considered political, such as fashion and sport. However, again, the combination of article 638 of the Islamic penal code and the conservative Islamic perspective regarding women's presence in public space has led to a series of arbitrary restrictions and debates around women's cycling in Iran.

Conflicts and Controversies Around Women's Cycling after the 1979 Revolution

As mentioned earlier, even though there is no legal restriction regarding women's cycling in Iran, this issue has been at the centre of controversies since the 1979 revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic government in Iran. However, during the last 40 years, various efforts have been made to normalize women's cycling in public spheres. The efforts have taken place at the national, provincial, and local levels.

Since the 1979 revolution, even though the Islamic Republic government limited access of women to the public sphere, Iranian women were aware of the importance of their citizenry rights and their rights to be freely present in the public arena as equal citizens. Hoodfar (2015) discussed that engaging in sport activities is a political act. She shared a local level practise of Iranian women in different neighborhoods not long after the 1979 revolution in 1981 when women from different households started to taking walks and morning exercises in their local parks to win back their right of free access to public spaces.

> We have learned that if we are not out there holding our ground, they take away the little we have, wanting us to live even worse than our grandmothers. They want to force the veil on us, tell us we should not do sports, and we should not be out in parks and public spaces, or work. (Hoodfar 2015, p.39).

This quote points to the ongoing comprehension, assessment of the situation and efforts of women to keep and acquire their equal rights as Iranian citizens. In the following sections I discuss how Iranian women galvanized various strategies to not lose access to public space and how cycling is a means of presence and movement in society within the patriarchal conservative socio-political context after the 1979 revolution.

The 90s, National-level Political Pushes and Pushbacks

After the 1979 revolution in Iran, women's body exposure before non-Mahram men has been the main issue that clerics and religious people mainly have focused on. It was the main barrier against women's sports (Rajabi 2014, para. 10). This issue was addressed by gender segregation in some sports. Despite these obstacles, women finally forced the government and various institutions within it to adopt a more reasonable interpretation of religious laws, and authorities. Women cycling advocates tried to find solutions and ways out of the problems. One suggestion was to design appropriate dress, and the second debate was to design a bicycle that covers the back of their bottom in order not to excite men. These points of view towards women's sport and cycling in the public sphere were close to the patriarchal discussions that were going on in 19th century Europe and North America. While European women were aiming to design a more suitable attire, by adopting pantaloons from the Middle Eastern and Turkey women's pants, for riding a bicycle, the conservative points of view were objecting the reform in outfit immediately while claiming that such a change could lead women to challenge the gender roles and morality in the society (Macy 2011). However, Iranian women's cyclist advocates needed to work to find a gateway to prove that women's cycling in public can conform with the Islamic points of view toward women by proposing a new unique attire for women's cyclists to regain a right that they used to have before the revolution and adapt their practices according to the new socio-political environment and the new Islamic regulations.

In this redefined ideological stance, the Islamic Republic government expressed disapproval of a Western-influenced modernity, particularly in areas such as sports and women's rights. These leaders claimed the ability to establish an Islamic model of women's rights, allowing women to participate actively in social and political spheres and engage in sports without being "sexualized" or "objectified" as observed in Western societies. Within this context, advocates for women's sports formed an informal alliance comprising educated secular women in physical education, former elite athletes, religiously informed women, and politically influential figures. They used this ideological shift to lobby within the country for increased opportunities for women in sports and advocated for women's representation in the international arena. The alliance believed that the participation of Iranian women in international events would challenge the global perception that women in Iran were excluded and oppressed due to "Islamic" ideology (Hoodfar 2015).

One strategy was formulated concerning the domain of sports in science and health, specifically for women. By forming alliances with like-minded entities, they actively supported the organization of various significant scientific and policy-related congresses and conferences. These events featured prominent religious leaders who were invited to deliver keynote speeches addressing the intersection of health, Islam, and sports – an area that had received little theological attention before women brought it into public discourse. Many national and international research reports and papers, as a result, emphasized the significance of sports for women's health, particularly for mothers, both physically and psychologically (Hartmann-Tews & Pfister 2003). Moreover, discussions rooted in religious discourse led to the consensus that not only was sports permissible for women under Islam, but it was actively endorsed through Islamic principles as a necessity for maintaining health for both women and men. For example, in the 1990s, different divisions within the Physical Education Organization released a publication titled "Jaygah-e-varzesh Zanan dar nezam jomhory islami Iran" ("The Status of Women's Sport In The Islamic Republic Of Iran"), along with multiple editions of the Journal of Women and Sport. However, they later decided to discontinue the inclusion of the publication in their program (Hoodfar 2015).

In addition, the alliance proposed a Muslim Women's Olympics to counter religious barriers to women's participation in the Olympics. Initially dismissed, the idea gained traction through lobbying. Despite opposition, Iran reluctantly approved the Muslim Women's Olympics in 1991, influenced by conservative factions aiming to undermine it later. By 1993, the event

became a reality, showcasing a commitment to Islamic values and providing opportunities for Muslim women athletes. Faeze Hashemi Rafsanjani, a leading advocate for women's sports, promoted the Women's Islamic Games. While these games increased visibility for women's sports, they faced criticism for potentially reinforcing hijab rules and segregation. Proponents argued against historical exclusion of women from sports, emphasizing the need for female participation. Despite challenges, the Islamic games prompted Iran to invest in women's sports, fostering skilled athletes, coaches, and referees.

However, debates arose over Islamic dress codes and restrictions. Secular activists, both within Iran and globally, criticized such policies, highlighting the role of activism in challenging conservative leaders. Despite ideological resistance, their efforts kept women's public participation in focus, drawing international attention to the use of Islam to justify gender exclusion.

In 1994, during a seminar held by Tehran Municipality, named "Bicycle as a Means of Transportation," Faeze Rafsanjani highlighted the importance of accessibility of bicycles for women in society by pointing to the fact that "if bicycles supposed to be a means for commute, then women and men both need to use it; thus the social contexts need to be prepared for it" (Dehbashi 2016). Some even named her as the Moral Mother of Women's Sports and the founder of women's cycling after the 1979 revolution in Iran (Imna.ir 2019). In 1996, Faezeh Hashemi pioneered women's rights to cycle in Iran after the 1979 revolution at the national-political level by allocating a female-only bicycle route in Chitgar Park in Tehran (Rajabi 2014).

However, all the efforts and promotions encountered a series of attacks mainly by religious, more conservative groups of clerics who, at the top, were the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1996, Ali Khamenei, in response to the idea of women cycling, claimed that:

"If you promote cycling, then we will have girls cycling in the streets of Tehran. Clearly, this would not be appropriate. Tehrani women cycling in the city is not comparable to Chinese women cycling because with the Chinese, in the time of Mao and even later, as we have seen, you could not really distinguish between men and women cycling on city streets, especially with their kind of clothes. But women in Tehran with their tight pants and skintight clothes getting on elaborate bicycles is sinful exposure")Zamaneh Media 2016, para. 10).

The Houzah News Channel also criticized Faezeh Hashemi's efforts toward promoting women cycling by calling her actions "suspicious" and wrote, "women's cycling is against modesty and the traditional and religious thoughts of the Muslim people of Iran" (Didbaniran.ir 2022, para. 1). However, women politicians and activists resisted such a perspective toward women's cycling. Thus, many women participated in a movement, which will be discussed in the upcoming section focusing on grassroot local level efforts, to show their disagreement with removing them from the public sphere and limiting their access to the city as equal citizens.

Despite these religious conservative attitudes toward women's cycling, several officials have supported female cycling in public. For example, in 2012, according to Mohammadreza Mahmoudi, a former deputy head of civil affairs for the Governor of Tehran, "Based on our investigations, there is no ban on the use of bicycles by women, and one cannot confront them solely for cycling" (Sheikhi 2016, para. 11).

In another round of effort coming from women politicians to promote girls cycling, in 2016, Masooume Ebtekar, the vice president of Iran for Women and Family Affairs (who served in office from 2017 to 2021 and also for many years served as the head of the Environment Organization), stated that "women's cycling in sportive spaces is not prohibited; the issue of cycling is important from different dimensions and angles because it is a matter of sports, the government acts within the framework of the law, and we do not have a law in this field that prohibits it. In the old days, women used bicycles to travel... this device is very healthy, it helps to reduce air

pollution, and on the other hand, it affects women's health" (Zeinali 2020, para. 15). In addition, Sohila Jolodar Zadeh, a feminist activist and a parliament member for thirteen years claimed that "so far, I have not seen a fatwa stating that riding a bicycle is haram, and a permissible act that can create personal privacy for the user should not be declared prohibited by legal authorities. On the other hand, considering that it is painful for women to ride a bus, minibus, or taxi when it is crowded, there is no problem if women can travel a distance by bicycle or motorcycle. This case, like entering the stadiums[4], which is objectionable for no logical reason according to some critics, has no legal or religious prohibition" (Zeinali 2020, p. 16). Also, Shahindokht Molaverdi, the vice president of Iran for Women and Family Affairs who was in office from 2013 to 2017, tweeted a claim by Khamenei saying that "cycling for women neither contravenes the law nor the Sharia." However, this quote was denounced by the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, stating that "women are not allowed to cycle in public or in the presence of strangers" (BBC News 2016, para. 2).

In addition to the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, other prominent religious figures such as Ayatollah Safi-Golpayegani stated that cycling for women is not allowed because it is "against chastity and zeal[5] and Islamic traditions in the name of sports in public places and on roads. In addition to the fact that the display of women's bodies before strangers' men's eyes is forbidden, because it promotes prostitution and corruption. Therefore, watching these programs [women's sport] and encouraging them is forbidden. The Almighty God has protected our Islamic society, which has raised the flag of Islam and the rule of Islamic rules in the world and has made Muslims proud and dear from such dangers that cause anxiety in the mind and tarnish the character. It is our Islam; please preserve it" (Zeinali 2020, para. 18).

Ayatollah Sistani, Ayatollah Behjat, Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi, and Ayatollah Sobhani-Tabrizi also held the same attitude toward women cycling in public and forbid it because it might spread sin in society by putting women's body before eyes of strangers and tempt them to commit haram acts. These controversies happened after a series of attempts initiated by different cities' municipalities to encourage citizens to bike instead of using motor vehicles, which again heated the discussions around women's cycling in public spheres in Iran.

Provincial-Level Efforts in Municipalities

In the context of an increasingly politicized environment, numerous women since the 2010s have strategically employed the justification of environmental conservation. This not only lends a more legitimate facade to their cause but also provides a face-saving solution for the regime. Additionally, some municipalities have embraced this notion, anticipating potential electoral benefits. While some individuals may genuinely support this cause due to the acknowledgment that restricting women from cycling is unlawful, others may adopt the environmental argument for different motives. In 2016, new efforts took place at the provincial level in the municipality of multiple cities in Iran to promote cycling for citizens. As a result, another round of controversies over women's cycling spiked up. The Car-Free Tuesdays program started in December 2015 in Arak, one of the central provinces of Iran (Fararu.com 2018). In January 2016, twenty provinces in Iran launched this program to reduce the air pollution in the cities mainly caused by using motorcycles and cars (IRNA.ir 2016). In this plan, some shared bikes became available in the cities, and citizens needed to activate and access them through

[4] After the 1979 revolution women were not allowed to enter football stadiums. There were many objections, campaigns and efforts to end this restriction. In September 2019, Sahar Khodayari known as Blue Girl, self-immolated to protest women's ban from entering football stadiums (Lewis, 2019). After this incident and with international pressure from FIFA, in October 2019, for the first time after the 1979 revolution, a selected group of women were allowed to watch a football match in Azadi Stadium in Tehran, Iran (Agance France-Presse, 2019).

[5] The concept of chastity (Haya) is associated with modesty, decency, and the avoidance of actions or behaviors that may lead to immodesty or indecency. Zeal (ghira) refers to a protective and possessive sense of honor, particularly in the context of familial and social relationships. They want to control women's movement and sexuality in the society.

an application named, Bi-Dood (Pishkan.com 2018). In addition, people were encouraged to use their bicycles or public transportation to commute on the Car-Free Tuesday program. In this plan, Municipalities aimed to promote cycling culture and public transportation usage in the cities; however, some debates and restrictions arose surrounding women's cycling in the street following this plan.

One of the very first provinces that launched this program was the western provinces of Iran, including Kermanshah. However, in Marivan, police intervened and prevented women from cycling (Khabaronline.ir 2016). Some connected this incident to a fatwa coming from the Prayer Leader of the city that was interpreted as announcing women's cycling is a haram act. However, the prayer leader of Marivan did not state that women's cycling is a haram act, but he specified that women need to wear a proper hijab while cycling. In addition, in response to a question asking if women's bikers need to wear any specific form of hijab from Mansoor Moradi, the parliament member of Marivan at the time, stated that "the hijab of women cyclists is not a special form of hijab, but the custom of today's society for covering women needs to be observed; in which case, there are no restrictions for women" (Khabaronline.ir 2016, para.13).

In a similar incident in Tehran, on September 6, 2016, a Car-Free Tuesday ride was broken by police because it did not have approval from the Municipal Security Council (Zamaneh Media 2016). Also, in Alborz province, women did not have access to the shared bikes provided on the Car-Free Tuesdays. The head of the Alborz cycling board mentioned that "currently, the presence of women in this plan is restricted because it has limitations" (ISNA.ir 2016, para. 1). The claims and attitudes towards women's cycling are as vague and to some level arbitrary as can be read in the quote mentioned above. Due to the vagueness and possibility of various interpretations of laws regarding public chastity and the ways that it can be disturbed by women's presence in the public sphere before non-mahram men's eyes, these provincial-level efforts to facilitate cycling for every citizen became only available for male citizens and companies which run the city shared bikes project were not providing services to women (Zamaneh Media 2016).

Modified Bicycle for Women's Physical Needs

Despite the fact that using bicycles as a means of transportation was being promoted and used by some city managers, women, along with people under 15 years old, remained barred from cycling in public places and from receiving city cycling services provided in some cities in Iran. For instance, in Isfahan, as a response to multiple complaints coming from clerics in the city considering women's cycling as an inappropriate act, on May 14, 2019, Isfahan city prosecutor, Ali Isfahani, announced that "based on fatwas by religious scholars as well as the law, bicycling by women in public spaces is a sinful act" (Iranhumanrights.org 2019, para. 2). Isfahani claimed that the Municipality of Isfahan has been advised to design a unique form of bicycle for women that is covered (Iranhumanrights.org, 2019). One style of the bicycles designed for women resembles the image above. According to one of the CEOs of the Bicycle designer company, “for the design of this bicycle, four months were spent addressing the religious issues associated with bicycles. Considering the physical needs of women, a significant modification has also been made to the bicycles” (Tabnak.ir 2011). However, this bicycle never reached the stage of public use and access.

As a result of controversies about women’s cycling in the cities, Isfahan police received an order from the "Office for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" to prevent women from using bicycles in public. Police must warn women bicyclists that if they have their IDs with them, police need to take them. Otherwise, their bike must be seized until they go to the security police

and sign a document pledging that they will not repeat this illegal haram act. If a woman continues cycling and is arrested for the second or the third time, she will be punished according to Islamic Penal Code (Tabnak.ir 2019).

Although many cities in Iran suffer from air pollution, many provincial-level plans toward encouraging people to use bicycles were scrutinized by religious and conservative groups prohibiting or restricting women's bicycle usage. This issue has caused severe hindrances in the way of public health. Reducing women's access to shared bikes offered by the city made cycling a gender and class-related issue. Women from lower socio-economic statuses who do not own bikes could not be benefitted from the programs offered by municipalities due to religious attitudes regarding women's bodies and presence in the public sphere and the notion of public chastity.

However, Iranian women defy various restriction rules and fatwas by riding their bicycles in public spaces, and they protest these conservative perspectives by not only cycling in the streets but also through organised grassroots movements utilizing online and offline platforms. The following section discusses the local-level efforts that fight for women's rights to bike freely in public spaces in Iran.

Grassroot Local-Level Movement to Promote Women's Cycling in Iran

While Islamic Conservative perspectives in Iran after the 1979 revolution continued to obstruct routes for women to use bicycles in public, Iranian women supported by men kept up protesting these arbitrary decisions and orders. They strive to acquire their right to bike freely in Iran.

In response to restrictions imposed on women's cyclist presence on Car-Free Tuesdays, a group of activists started a campaign to support women's cycling rights. On August 23, 2016, a group of women and men were holding a piece of paper presenting a quote from Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, saying that "women's cycling is both legal and conforms to Sharia law." Although, as mentioned earlier, this quote was denounced, and a new fatwa was published from Khamenei that bans women from cycling, Iranian women continue protesting such arbitrary decisions by sharing the #IranianWomenLoveCycling hashtag and publishing videos of themselves while cycling on online platforms (BBC News 2016). My Stealthy Freedom movement page[6] was protesting mandatory hijab law, was also promoting these hashtags, and shared videos of Iranian women joining the #IranianWomenLoveCycling campaign.

#IranianWomenLoveCycling campaign (Source: My Stealthy Freedom Facebook Page)

One of the outstanding highlights of this campaign was the widespread support from different generations. For example, in a video shared on My Stealthy Freedom Movement's Facebook page, a young girl, along with her mother, joined the supported movement while cycling, stating that:

[6] My Stealthy Freedom Facebook page is a social media platform that was created in 2014 as a space for Iranian women to share photos of themselves without wearing the mandatory hijab (headscarf) in Iran. The page was established by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist and activist living abroad.

> We're in Kish Island (Iran). My mom and I are from Tehran. Bicycle riding is part of our lives. We were in Kish when we heard Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa banning women from bicycling. We immediately rented two bicycles to say we're not giving up cycling. It is our absolute right, and we're not going to give up[7]

In another photo of a supporter of the #IranianWomenLoveCycling campaign, a young cyclist girl stated her message in the caption, reading that:

> This photo was taken around Highway 77, north of Tehran close to the Firoozkooh area. I wish we, too [as female cyclists], commanded some respect. Expecting Iranian women to enjoy the same rights as men in order to be able to freely ride bicycles in their own country is not too much to ask. Let's respect and support each other[8]

Through online and offline protests, Iranian women demanded freedom of choice regarding their body's appearance in public. Some women protested mandatory hijab laws and restrictive rules regarding women's cycling in public using online platforms. They shared photos of themselves cycling without hijab and invited others to join in the captions under their pictures. For example, one of the posts read:

Let's take our streets back from those who think cycling and showing hair are the biggest crimes for women. That is the way we will be free and not stealthy anymore".[9] Or one other girl shared a picture of herself on a bike without hijab and wrote:

> "We are fighting every day and, in every way, we can fight for our rights. We are fighting for our freedom of choice. We love our beautiful country, and we want to live here with respect. We are not going to give up.[10]

In addition, men supported women and took photos and videos along with their female friends and family members while cycling to show that women are not alone in this fight for liberty. For example, a biker couple shared their picture and wrote: "This is me and my husband...We won't surrender to a fatwa".[11]

A man driving a cycle with a woman passenger (Source: The Guardian)

As can be read in these posts, the arbitrary point of view toward women's cycling did not stop Iranian women from using bicycles in public. But instead, it encouraged women to bike as a form of resistance to systematic oppression from religious patriarchal perspectives that wanted to control women's appearance and presence in the public sphere. It also mobilized men to protest these fatwa and support women in this battle.

Discussion

Despite all debates and obstacles in the way of women's cyclists, Iranian women continued using bicycles and resisting unfair fatwas. In addition, to the impact of local-level movement and activities, the provincial and national-level efforts toward promoting women's right to freely cycle in the public sphere have paved the way

[7] Stealthy Freedom. (2016, September 19). Facebook post. https://facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/

[8] Alinejad, M. (2016, September 19). Instagram post. https://instagram.com/masih.alinejad/

[9] Stealthy Freedom. (2016, November 28). Facebook post. https://facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/.

[10] Stealthy Freedom. (2017, May 2). Facebook post. https://facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/

[11] Stealthy Freedom. (2017, May 2). Facebook post. https://facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/

for women to cycle regardless of backward notions about their cycling in public. National-level efforts regarding women's sports, specifically cycling, had a long-term impact on society. It worked as a "wave that cannot be halted anymore" (ISNA 2022, para. 73). As a result, the religious perspective that aimed to restrict women's cyclists in public became irrelevant and lost its legitimacy because those fatwas were based on a narrow interpretation of Islam that overly sexualize women's body.

After the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in September 2022 in Iran, the Islamic Republic government and religious conservative attitude lost their legitimacy even more than before in the eyes of many Iranians (Lucas 2022). Interestingly, in June 2023, a women's cyclist competition took place in a road next to Ayatollah Khomeini's Holy Shrine in Tehran (Jamaran.news 2023) . The news regarding this competition were covered in the official TV of Iran (Khabaronline.ir 2023). This is a new approach to women's cycling, covered in a national news channel and held in the public sphere near the shrine of the founder of the Islamic Republic. This shows that when various groups of people in a society, regardless of their age, or gender, want something at various levels (local, provincial, national) and take action for it, the governing body needs to accept it to win back its legitimacy. While women's cycling was announced as a haram act by the current leader of Iran in 2016, women's cycling competitions were organised and celebrated by officials, including the vice president of the Sports and Youth Ministry, in 2023 near the former leader of the Islamic Republic's holy shrine.

Although this is an achievement for women cyclists, there are some obstacles. While there is a women's cycling team in Iran that participates in international competitions, including the Olympics, there is little to no support for them. Foroozan Abdollahi, who started professional cycling in 2011 (Etemadonline.com 2023) and has won two Union Cyclist International races (Firstcycling.com 2023), in an interview with Etemadonline claimed that due to lack of support, "women's cycling is going to be extirpated." Elabourating on the issues in the way of women's cyclists' teams, she asserted that the lack of attention might be coming from the fact that "they do not really care about women's cycling" (Etemadonline.com 2023, para. 10). In fact, government officials claimed that they achieved their legitimacy only by sending the cyclist team to the Olympics and they do not want the team to win. As a result, the team did not actually receive proper training or equipment.

In addition, while discussions around women's cycling in Iran formed mainly around religious boundaries and restrictions set by the government, on social and cultural levels, women can face harassment mainly from cisgender men while cycling in public. The Islamic penal code and conservative perspectives mainly restrict women's bodies and presence in public to "protect women" and "keep the virtue of society away from sin." It is actually a way to control women and keep them at home, away from the public sphere as free citizens. Therefore, some are free to harass women who bike in public without being afraid of any consequences they might face from physically or verbally insulting women cyclists. Islamic patriarchal perspectives confine women's appearance to keep society pure and away from sin. This reinforces the mindsets of men (and also some women themselves) that sexualize and objectify women's bodies as tools for pleasure and child-rearing, and does not see women as independent, active members of society who are in charge of their own lives and decisions.[12]

Women freely cycling in public has a significant positive effect at the social and individual level, especially in Iran, including a positive impact on public health; reduction of air pollution; reduction in traffic in big cities; increase in the level of happiness in society; increase in

[12] However, the #MeToo Movement, an ongoing movement, has been taking place in Iran as well as all over the world to protect women's bodies from harassment by setting boundaries, increasing awareness, and confronting perpetrators' harassment instead of restricting victims' bodies and blaming them for their appearance.

happiness in families who can cycle as a familial activity; more specifically it has a positive impact on women's mental and physical health and a positive impact on people's economic condition (Docharkhehmag.ir 2020). Above all, it signifies that women, as citizens, possess the entitlement to inhabit public spaces, move without constraints imposed by laws, cultural norms, communities, or families. This underscores their autonomy and fundamental rights as citizens. However, it is crucial to modify the legal terms so that arbitrary perspectives cannot easily jeopardize women's equal rights. In addition, allowing women access to shared bikes in cities, normalizing cycling culture, raising public awareness regarding women's body ownership, and the consequences of harassing them are the next steps toward a healthier cycling society, where women can cycle freely and safely in the public sphere. Building proper infrastructure and making the above mentioned changes would help women from different socio-economic statuses and backgrounds to bike freely and safely and exercise their citizenry rights in society.

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Chapter 2: Pakistani Women Cyclists in the Pursuit of Gender Equality

Iqra Khan and Rida Khan, supervised by Maira Asif

Introduction

Mobility in urban spaces is experienced differently based on one's gender (Kouamé 2023). The sight of a Pakistani woman in a public space, particularly a young one, generates a sense of "anxiety," and she is made to feel unwelcome by the leering male gaze as her body appears to be in the wrong time and space (Anwar 2018).

In our everyday vernacular, an *Aurat's* (woman's) place is associated with the private. Aurat is honoured within the private, i.e. considered *izzatdar,* safe, and deemed moral. Restricted to the domestic sphere, women represent the "symbolic markers of a community, the keepers of its tradition, and the bearers of its honour" (Phadke 2011). If the Aurat subverts her place of domesticity, she is regarded as *awara*. Even though the word *awara* translates into someone who is separated from their family and is in a state of wandering, it is regarded as a curse word for women. *Awara* brings a distaste when used in the context of women because it disrupts our understanding of the gendered space. It is often assumed that in South Asian cultures "a loitering woman is up to no good" (Phadke 2011). Whether that means that the loitering woman is transgressing cultural norms by stepping outside the home alone or wasting time or soliciting, she is considered dangerous, immoral, uncontrollable, or "irrational" or all the aforementioned (Phadke 2011).

When women step outside the private sphere in Pakistan, their presence in the public elicits national fear and responses of irrationality and disrespectability. This reaction was witnessed when a cycling rally was organised in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which the public deemed as vulgar and immoral (Dawn 2022). The notion of "respectability" is contingent upon what kind of space a woman occupies; a woman is deemed to be "respectable" if she occupies private space and "unrespectable" if she is in a public space (Phadke 2011). Women are presumed to depart from the social norms when they step out of the private space demonstrating a complex interplay between gendered social norms and exercising one's agency in public spaces. Space, thus, plays a pivotal role as a medium for politics in society.

This suggests that the term 'space' implies not merely the physical environment, rather, it is a means by which an individual can exercise their agency. A space is where an individual expresses, whether explicitly or implicitly, beliefs and opinions that are central to the formation of a society. Space is the medium where new experiences, knowledge, identities, and relations are formed, politics is materialized, challenging socio-political hierarchies (Dikec 2015). In the context of Pakistan, where gender and social norms significantly influence a woman's choice to access public spaces, recent years have witnessed several grassroots initiatives by individuals and groups to claim public spaces through cycling such as *Girls at Dhabbas* and *Lyari Girls Cafe*. Thus, cycling is used as a tool for political action to challenge the "natural order of domination" i.e. patriarchy (Dikeç 2015).

This research is an exploration of the gendered experience of public space. It seeks to identify the barriers women cyclists encounter in public spaces by understanding the public perceptions about women cyclists in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This study aims to explore the relationship of women cyclists with the public space. It qualitatively studies the subjective meanings of the participants and their gendered relation to public spaces. Theoretically grounded in a feminist lens, we assert that gendered experiences are important sites to produce knowledge. A feminist standpoint perspective unveils hierarchies and structures that help us understand the limitations the cultural politics of public spaces pose

on women cyclists' mobility in Pakistan, allowing us to envision alternative solutions to make public spaces inclusive and accessible to all genders.

Three regular women cyclists were interviewed for this research using a semi-structured interview design encompassing a series of open-ended questions to gain a comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences of the public space as cyclists. Ethical guidelines were followed for the interviews. Voluntary consent was taken from participants for audio-recording, and they were informed of the research. The interviews were stored in a drive and then transcribed. Thematic analysis was then carried out.

A survey was also designed that aimed to explore the general perspectives of undergraduate students about Pakistani women who cycle or use any other two-wheeler (motorcycle/scooter) as a mode of transportation. The survey was posted online in different social media groups and was conducted in English. Data was then visualized using Google Forms and numeric analysis was carried out.

As a disclaimer, the responses to the survey are not to be generalized. The responses were restricted to a certain class of individuals, middle class university students and fresh graduates studying in Pakistan. The demographic profile of participants in the survey included their gender, education background (whether they were university students or fresh graduates), the city they resided in, their age, whether they owned a two-wheeler, and their primary and secondary means of transport as a university student.

The survey was carried out online to make it accessible to respondents who lived in different cities in Pakistan. However, carrying out the survey online also excluded those who did not have technological access. Furthermore, the survey was carried out in English because it is mainly used as a mode of communication in higher education institutes in Pakistan. The survey targeted university students and fresh graduates specifically because we presume that while attending universities women gain autonomy as they pursue opportunities like internships, workshops, and part-time jobs to enhance their professional growth. Furthermore, many young women from rural areas relocate to urban cities to pursue higher education. Thus, women realise that they need to become independent in terms of mobility without being dependent on male escorts from their family (Zulfiqar 2020). Since the majority of the Pakistani population does not possess a private vehicle (such as a car), women are primarily dependent on public transportation for mobility (Zulfiqar 2020). However, the fear of harassment in public transportation deters many women from using it. In recent years, Pakistani women have begun riding motorcycles in public spaces for mobility as demonstrated by initiatives like *Pink Riders* (NIKKEI Asia 2023). This survey seeks to understand the perceptions of young people about women who use a two-wheeler.

In light of the aforementioned limitations, it should be noted that the survey results should not be generalized since they are not representative of all Pakistani citizens.

Gendered Spaces

Spaces, as Jana Nakhal highlights, are gendered in the sense that both space and gender mirror the influence of social mores in daily life experiences (Nakhal 2015). Whereas men inhabit the public sphere, women are confined to the private sphere owing to the gendered roles for example the private spaces encompass domestic needs like family while the public sphere is characterized with the needs of a civil society where men explore the uncharted boundaries of intellectual and physical pursuits (Wright 2012).

In the South Asian context, Faisal Devji's work is crucial in understanding the public private binary. Devji (1991) argues that this dichotomy existed in the legal Shariat culture of Islam. The public realm is privileged as it is an area of action where men perform prayers in mosques. The public, then, had a moral imperative and it was valorised as it represented the moral community

of the Muslims. The distinction between the public and the private was marked by morality where the public was a space of a regulated moral order whereas the private was unregulated, an arena of fitnah or represented the 'pagan'. The private was the domain of the slaves and women whereas the public was marked by a masculine form of 'Muslimness'. The subjects of the private were careful to step into the boundaries of the public space, neither looking nor looked at, rendering their bodies invisible. But the wariness of the women in public was also marked by a threat of their 'sexed' body. Women's bodies were eroticized and hence, had to be disciplined when they laid claim to the public spaces. Their bodies were living sexual organs which had to be hidden. This is also where the word '*Aurat*' derives its connotation, from the word '*Awrat'* which means genitalia.

During the colonial period, Muslim men expressed masculine anxieties related to the protection of the private sphere as the immorality of the public sphere posed a threat. The sexuality of the Muslim woman had to be controlled as she stepped outside in the public, which was characterized by immorality and *fitnah*. In this sense, the distinction between the public and the private became more stringent. The Muslim woman became a moral force that had to be protected from the impurity and corruption of the public space thereby secluding her to the private space.

The divide between the public and private spheres gives birth to a power dynamic whereby the authority rests within the public domain (Wright 2012) thereby complicating the private/public dichotomy.

> "If I get into an accident, men ask me what I am doing on the roads. They say if I had stayed at home, the accident would not have happened in the first place. But it is not men who can decide who can be on the roads and who cannot be,'' A cyclist from Karachi in her early thirties stated during her interview.

McDowell (1983) argues that spaces are not neutral and cannot be devoid of their gendered socio-political implications. The relegation of certain bodies to the private while others to the public is a gendered process but also a form of disciplinary mechanism which can be a form of biopower by the state. Biopower is a modern form of power in which states exercise control over bodies and the longevity of their lives through multiple mechanisms. Disciplinary mechanism is one of the methods in which biopower is exercised in which certain bodies become punishable for transgressing boundaries.

When certain spaces are restricted by the state and social power structures, or in other words, when some individuals of the society are confined to spaces because of gender and social norms, it gives rise to injustice through the exercise of a state's biopower. The preclusion of such individuals from spaces gives rise to politics when the social hierarchies are challenged. By claiming public space, a woman can challenge such power structures constructed by the society, dismantling the notion that public spaces only belong to men.

> A woman cyclist from Skardu who lives in Lahore note that "in the recent years, numerous women cycling groups have sprung up. Furthermore, feminist movements like Aurat March have also played a role in shaping societal roles about women cyclists. Social media influencers who promote women cyclists and cycling have provide a safe space for women cyclists and encouraged them."

Pakistan Women's Association organised a recent cycling rally in March 2023, on 'World Women's Day' in Liberty Lahore, which echoed the need for women to access public spaces through cycling. (Daily Times 2023)

Space, therefore, plays a pivotal role in politics since space is employed as a medium to give birth to political activities (Dikeç 2015).

Mobility of Pakistani Women in Public Spaces

Statistics show that Pakistani women are nearly 4 times less mobile than men with 80% of them being dependent upon public transport (Salman Sufi Foundation 2024). The term, mobility encompasses not only physical transportation but also partaking in activities in urban spaces that embody power (Anwar 2021). When women are precluded from accessing public spaces due to their gender it has the effect of restricting their mobility thereby limiting their access to basic needs like education, healthcare, and social connections (Adeel 2016).

In Pakistan's history, the veil has been a site of political contestation by feminists. The state imposed the distinction between the public and the private through its Islamic ideology. The military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, propagated the idea of *chador* and *chardivari* which can be translated as veil and four walls of the home whereby women were relegated to the private sphere, precluding them from their "participating in the public sphere" (Nazeer, Sadia & Yaqub 2021). Women's presence in the public was surveilled and managed through several disciplinary mechanisms by the state. Head coverings were made compulsory for female anchors who appeared in the media, and they were not allowed to wear heavy makeup. The national dress, *shalwar kameez*, and a *dupatta* or *chador* over the head were the rigorous clothing codes for women who did appear in the media. This is an example of how women's appearance was managed in public by the state. This form of disciplinary violence can be viewed in light of the nation-building project of Zia where he had to build an image of the "Muslim" as a result of the geo-politics surrounding that time. According to Hussain et al. (1997), women are considered as national symbols for nationalist projects. Hence, through such disciplinary regulations, Zia created an image of the 'pious Muslim woman' in the public nationalist imaginary of the country.

Even today when veiling is no longer mandatory for women, it is crucial for social acceptance, especially while navigating streets and public spaces where *ghair* (unrelated) males predominate (Adeel 2016). In 2022, a women's cycling camp set up in northwest Pakistan garnered attention and opposition from religious political parties (Dawn 2022). It was called "vulgar" and a threat to religion. The local women who have faced religious opposition to cycling in KP have adopted a vernacular form of resistance. They have responded by stating that their clothing is appropriate to religious standards as witnessed by the Islamic dress code that some women have worn such as wearing a hijab/head covering. Thus, veiling should not be viewed primarily from the lens of inhibiting agency as it could be a means of accessing public spaces.

However, it should also be contended that cultural clothing is not an option opted out of pure choice. As such, one of the interview participants, a cyclist who is based in Faisalabad and has been cycling for two years, said that she would wear Western clothing to cycle but was often harassed by the locals over there. She stopped wearing Western clothing when the university she attended prohibited students from wearing a Western dress code. She was compelled to dress in *shalwar kameez* while cycling which was a hindrance to her mobility as she had to worry about the *dupatta* being stuck in a tire. Other participants also expressed concerns about safety while wearing this cultural attire.

Some studies theorize how certain modes of transportation can be deemed as respectable for women in Pakistan. Using a personal vehicle is "respectable" for women because it is an extension of the "home", a mobile enclosed environment that upholds the logic of invisibility/hypervisibility for feminine bodies designated for male gaze and surveillance (Masood 2018). In this sense, cars and rickshaws become respectable modes of transportation as it is not only a class signifier but also does not overtly transgress the boundaries between the public and the private. Otherwise, the study suggests that women experience harassment when they are "visible" in public. From this theoretical lens, women's visibility in the public is transgressive of the boundaries of the private or home. Any woman who deviates from the gender norms faces the threat of "gender-based violence" restricting the mobility of women (Anwar 2018).

Furthermore, the mobility of women is shaped by gender norms and power dynamics that give rise to male dominance in public spaces which governs the conduct of women. For example, in instances of violence against women in public spaces, there is a perception that it is "natural" for men to be entitled to such spaces (Anwar 2018). Furthermore, violence is often resorted as a measure to "control women's bodies" as men are perceived to uphold "morality, tradition, and decency" in society (Anwar 2018).

The fear of harassment and social norms restricts women's mobility in public spaces which precludes them from numerous opportunities like participation in the labour force, and education, to name a few.

Cycling as a Means of Resistance by Pakistani Women

It is an unusual sight to spot a Pakistani woman riding a two-wheeler in a public space whether for exercise, leisure, transport, or any other purpose (Khan, 2022).

> Whenever I cycle in public, people make me feel alienated. It is only when more women cycle in public that it will be normalized and the feeling of being alienated will be dissipated, shared a professional cyclist in her late twenties from Skardu, Gilgit Baltistan.

In April 2017, Pakistani women cyclists partook in races to challenge the "male dominance of public spaces" and gain "visibility" in public spaces (Dawn 2017). The event was more than just a cycling rally. It was a symbolic form of activism by women to subvert the masculine hegemony of public spaces. The event was organised by a group called "Girls at Dhabbas," a grassroots project without an official funding source or connection to any governmental or non-governmental organizations. It gained attention in 2015 when the hashtag, #GirlsatDhabbas went viral after Sadia Khatri posted an initial Instagram photo of herself sipping chai alone in Karachi in 2014. After that post, several other women posted pictures of themselves alone in a *dhabba*.

Dhabba, in the Urdu language and Pakistani context, is a term that refers to "roadside tea stalls dominated by men but never closed to women" (Ilyas 2015). A *dhabba* signifies a central site of "informal land use in increasingly privatized public spaces" (Rashid 2020). The initiative evolved from a digital hashtag to individual acts of resistance in the form of *chai* (tea) "activism" at a *dhabba* uniting Pakistani women to redefine how urban spaces look (Rashid 2020).

Slowly, the movement developed into a collective of feminists who supported and took part in a range of projects. The focus was to raise awareness of women's freedom of mobility which they had experienced in Western cities and also to bridge the class divide by bringing women into open and lower-class spaces like the *dhabba* and discover solidarity in acts such as bike rallies, study circles, and girls' street cricket (Ilyas 2015).

However, they received backlash from women and were harassed in public. Photos of women from these events were zoomed in, focused on their body parts, and the women were called "prostitutes". Women's presence in the public was deemed immoral which made them susceptible targets of backlash, categorizing them as sexual subjects as "prostitutes".

Similarly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a cycling rally for girls was organised in 2022 and received significant backlash from the religious parties. The cycling rally was labelled as 'vulgar', 'un-Islamic', and a threat to local religion and culture (Dawn 2022).

However, the cycling girls retaliated by stating that they were dressed in cultural attire and were wearing a hijab. This feminist engagement is interesting to explore as women in different geographical regions of Pakistan negotiate their agency in the public using different rhetoric. Here, the women appealed to the adherence to cultural values in the form of dress code to react to the religious right's concerns about women in the public sphere. This form of retaliation should

be seen in context within the political history of the province that has had a strong foothold of religious extremists, like the Taliban.

Lyari Girls Cafe is another feminist initiative that organises weekly cycling rallies for women in Karachi. District Lyari has a history of political conflict and has been infamous for masculine tropes of gang violence. This feminist cycling initiative subverts the hegemonic masculine stereotypes of the district. However, this is not to say that the district has been fully supportive of this initiative. As such, the women cyclists were told that public riding was a form of 'moral corruption' and that they should be cycling in Defence as opposed to Lyari (Hadid 2019). It is interesting how women's visibility in the public space was associated with and more accepted in a certain neighbourhood as opposed to another. Defence Housing Authority (DHA) is an upper-class neighbourhood in contrast to Lyari which is considered a lower-class neighbourhood and consists of ethnic minorities like the Baloch. This finding is interesting as it differs from other literature that suggests women's mobility from the upper-class is more restricted due to 'class respectability'. The reason for this difference might be because areas like Defence resemble Western suburb neighborhoods in Karachi and might be perceived as "Western". In this sense, women's cycling is considered a "Western" or a foreign activity that is a threat to the local culture.

Data Analysis

The initiatives taken by individuals demonstrate how women are empowered to gain mobility in public spaces dominated by men through cycling. The public response to initiatives taken by Girls at Dhabbas, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cycling rally, and Lyari Girls Cafe is multi-faceted reflecting the need to understand public perceptions. Thus, this research surveyed university students to gain their perspectives about women cyclists and activism in public spaces. The survey targeted young individuals because of their involvement in activism and grassroots initiatives that challenge societal norms. By understanding their perceptions, the survey attempts to encapsulate the societal attitudes towards women cyclists who claim public spaces through individual acts of resistance.

Gendered disparity in using a two-wheeler

When the respondents who identified as women were asked about their primary and secondary modes of transportation as university students. The responses indicated that the majority used a university bus/van (31%) as a primary and secondary mode of transportation followed by car (27%). A sizable number of participants also used public transport (18%). The minority (13%) used a two-wheeler followed by rickshaw (2%) as a mode of transport. However, it is uncertain whether the minority who rides a two-wheeler does so themselves or is driven by male family members on the two-wheelers to their destination.

On the other hand, the majority of the participants who identified as men responded that they use a two-wheeler as a mode of transportation (46%), followed by car (31%). Moreover, the responses also indicated that some walked to the university instead of relying on any mode of transportation. Furthermore, the responses indicated that men did not rely on university buses/vans as a means of transport.

The interview responses also indicated the gender disparity in terms of public spaces. The interviewees described themselves as "one of the few women who cycled in the public space" and often received "reactions of surprise from men in the public space" in the form of "staring, with puzzled expressions on their faces". Hence, riding a two-wheeler or a bicycle for women in public spaces is an uncommon sight (Khan 2022) especially in a rural area. One of the interviewees who came from Skardu mentioned that it was a "rare sight to see women cycling in

Skardu. In Lahore, there is more freedom and opportunities to cycle compared to Skardu where women's visibility in the public was less."

The interviewees also expressed that there has been a comparative decrease in the gendered disparity of the visibility of women in urban public spaces where more women can be seen riding a bike or a bicycle as compared to the past five years. The interviewees attributed the reasons for this decreased disparity to training initiatives such as "Pink Riders," a motorcycle training institute founded by a Karachi-based entrepreneur that has trained more than 10,000 women (NIKKEI 2023). Furthermore, one of the interviewees also stated how "cycling initiatives for women in colleges and feminist social movements like the *Aurat* March decrease the gender disparity in public spaces."

Benefits of riding a two-wheeler

Although the majority of the respondents (61%) stated that it was a rare and occasional sight to see women riding a two-wheeler in public spaces, 92.7% of the participants were of the view that riding bicycles/scooters/motorcycles would positively affect the lives of Pakistani women.

Our interview responses indicated how cycling "eased the mobility" instead of relying on rickshaws or cabs that resulted in "high travelling costs." The low-cost maintenance of cycling made it easy for them to travel to university, work, and other places. Moreover, the interviewees described it as an environmentally friendly form of transport that aligned with their values of eco-friendliness. One of the interviewees expressed the health benefits associated with cycling as it was a recommended form of health exercise by the doctor.

The interviewees also mentioned how they gained autonomy through cycling as they did not have to be 'dependent' on their fathers or brothers for mobility anymore.

Beenish Afreen, a motorcyclist, in an interview, highlights how she feels empowered by riding a two-wheeler as she does not depend on anyone for transport. She notes how women in Pakistan are dependent on others for transport which restricts their freedom and mobility. If women own a two-wheeler, they can have freedom in terms of mobility and gain independence (Express Tribune 2018).

Barriers for women's mobility riding a two-wheeler

Most of the participants (75.6%) responded that "harassment fear" is the most significant factor why women in Pakistan do not ride motorcycles/bicycles/scooters. This was followed by "lack of family support" (70.7%) which was considered one of the limiting factors that most affect women who wish to cycle in public spaces, followed by reduced cultural support, religious restriction, and lack of infrastructure.

Street Harassment as a barrier

Most of the respondents (69.3%) stated that fear of harassment most influenced a woman's choice to access public space.

To understand their perception about how "harassment" acts as a barrier for women who want to ride a two-wheeler, the respondents were asked further questions. When the participants were asked whether women face harassment in the form of verbal abuse, bullying, catcalling, or groping when using a two-wheeler in public spaces, most of the respondents (90.2%) overwhelmingly agreed.

The interviewees also reported incidents of harassment in public spaces such as being followed by men. As a preventive measure, one of the interviewees mentioned how she pretended to call someone on the telephone when she was being followed. Because of harassment issues, one of the interviewees described it as an 'alienating experience'.

Noor Rahman in her article published in *Dawn* (2028) highlights how a women cyclist is in danger of being harassed as she cannot easily take action since, when cycling, all four limbs are occupied making it harder to escape the scenario (Rahman 2018).

Lack of family support and cultural support

A sizable number of respondents (70.7%) stated that lack of family support affected them the most in terms of influencing her choice to access public space using a two-wheeler. This was followed by reduced cultural support (53.7%).

One of the interviewees mentioned how her mother was not supportive of her cycling endeavour in Faisalabad and that she had to "convince other family members to gain permission to cycle." Similarly, another interviewee mentioned how her family imposed public restrictions upon her while growing up in Skardu. Because of these familial restrictions, she had to pretend to be a boy in public so that she would not be judged for cycling, having short hair, 'dressing in jeans, and not wearing traditional women's attire.

Another interviewee mentioned how the imposition of the dress code which disallowed jeans and shorts in the university made it difficult for her to cycle in the traditional clothing of *shalwar kameez*. Wearing comfortable clothes is important for cycling, she mentioned.

Another interviewee also cycled in a loose shirt and jeans while wearing a scarf. She mentioned how people would not notice that she was a woman cyclist until they noticed the scarf which would make them feel more surprised.

"Lack of family and cultural support" was also experienced by American women cyclists in the 19th century as it posed a threat to the "natural" femininity of women making them "manly" and "unfeminine" (Strange 2002) and challenged the characteristics of "True Womanhood" like piety, purity, docility, and domesticity" (Welter 1966). The social consequences of the bicycle were broader than just eroding the distinction between private and public spheres. Cycling not only challenged the notion of separate spheres by providing women a means of escape from their domestic spaces, but it also questioned the stereotypical gender characteristics of women like delicateness and traditional femininity that confined them to the private sphere (Strange 2002).

Religious Restrictions

About 37% of the respondents cited religious restriction as a factor that influenced a woman's choice in accessing public space. To understand the perception of religious restriction, the respondents were asked whether it is against 'Islamic religious morality' for women to ride a two-wheeler in public spaces to which the majority (95.1%) overwhelmingly disagreed.

Interviewees cited cultural reasons as opposed to religious ones that imposed barriers to cycling. The interviewees talked of gender roles, norms, and attitudes in the public space that explained the limited visibility of women cyclists and the kind of harassment that they had to face.

Poor Public Infrastructure

Poor infrastructure was also cited as a concern by 39.02% of participants as shown in Figure 3, indicating that better cycling infrastructure could contribute to increased women's mobility. When the participants were asked whether there is a lack of infrastructure (such as cycle tracks or bicycle lanes) for bicyclists/motorcyclists in public spaces, 95.1% said yes.

Furthermore, the majority (68.3%) agreed that the current public road infrastructure discourages women from bicycling/motorcycling. Of the participants, 75.6% also did not find that the public transport in their area was available and economically feasible enough for women to not require a bicycle/motorcycle/scooter.

Interviewees expressed how there was a lack of cycling lanes in cities which made it risky for cyclists to cycle in public. In terms of infrastructural support from the government, interviewees highlighted how training centres should be established by the government to promote women cycling. Moreover, schemes should be established that give free bicycles to women. Tax reduction on bicycles was also one of the incentives stated by a cyclist that could promote cycling opportunities for women.

The recent step taken by Capital Development Authority, Islamabad to implement the "Cycling as an alternate transport" project to develop 146km of dedicated cycling lanes, also signals an attempt to promote the use of the bicycle as a means of transportation (CDAthecapital 2023). Despite such measures, the absence of protective infrastructure required for bicycles in major cities is a barrier for many Pakistani women to access public spaces which requires serious urban planning related interventions to promote accessibility of public spaces for cyclists (Asim 2019).

Ways Forward

In light of the above discussion, gender-sensitive policies should be adopted by the government in urban planning to help women gain mobility and make them feel safer in public spaces (Abbas 2022). The architectural design of cities can be made safer for women if it is acknowledged that women, too, belong in public spaces (Nakhal 2015).

To eradicate the fear of harassment, there should be widespread awareness of human rights laws. The recent measures taken in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, by UN Women and the local Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection of Women Against Harassment at the Workplace, to establish knowledge counters on the "Anti-Harassment Law" at the provincial level and in relation to article 509 of Pakistan's Penal Code at the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service, have been a beacon of hope for the creation of a safe environment for women (Abbas 2021). Under section 509 of the Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860), harassment is a punishable offence, the offender being liable to a punishment of three years or fine or both. However, this should be accompanied by increased awareness about such legal protections to make public spaces more accessible for women.

Furthermore, the state should take similar measures to empower women's mobility and access to public spaces through the use of two-wheelers such as the Women on Wheels program. Under the program, 22,000 motorbikes will be distributed to women across Pakistan (Pakistan Observer 2023). Furthermore, the program intends to train 250,000 women to learn how to ride motorbikes by 2025 (Salman Sufi Foundation 2024). For further discussion on this initiative, see *Solutions for Women's Mobility in Pakistan: Case Study of Women on Wheels Pakistan* in this volume. The recent initiative taken by the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province to launch 'Zu Bicycle Sharing System,' a Chinese-style bike-sharing system in Peshawar City, alongside the construction of a separate bike-lane, is a noteworthy step to promote a cycling culture (Ali 2021). The bicycles are "gender neutral" and the design of the bicycle is "appropriate" according to the "cultural needs" of women in Peshawar (Ali 2021).

The research in this chapter can be used by policymakers and activists to make public space accessibility gender inclusive. One of the limitations of this study is its small sample size, therefore for further research studies, the sample size should be expanded beyond undergraduate student and women cyclists. Men cyclists and gender minorities, including transgender cyclists, could also be interviewed to gather insights into their experience of the public space. These investigations would allow for a comparative analysis of experiences across genders which would facilitate policy-making that caters to each gender identity's needs.

Conclusion

This research highlights how gender plays a crucial role in the mobility of women in public spaces, and how cycling grassroots initiatives are a form of activism in the reclaiming of public spaces for women. The survey results reflect a gendered disparity in the choice of transportation modes, especially for two-wheelers, among university students. Whereas the majority of men used a two-wheeler, the women relied on university buses and cars for transport. The interview responses from women cyclists indicated that urban spaces like Lahore and Karachi were more popular for cycling in public spaces than rural areas, especially after initiatives like "Pink Riders" and "Aurat March cycling rallies" which have decreased the gender disparity in urban spaces in recent years.

Furthermore, the research outlines how societal perceptions can influence women's mobility in public spaces through cycling. Negative perceptions towards women cyclists are reflected in the backlash received by feminist initiatives that challenge social norms by reclaiming public spaces dominated by men. The incidents of harassment by interviewees also indicate negative perceptions about women cyclists in public spaces. The survey responses underscored that the fear of harassment was a significant barrier to mobility in public spaces through cycling. It is therefore imperative to understand and address public perceptions to create an inclusive environment for women to gain mobility in public spaces through cycling.

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Chapter 3: Breaking Barriers: Empowering Women's Mobility in Pakistan through Women on Wheels

Maira Asif

Growing up as a young woman in Pakistan, the frustration stemming from limited transportation options and the necessity of a chaperone to access public spaces is a familiar experience. To illustrate the intricate social nuances of addressing mobility challenges for women, consider a personal anecdote from my life. In 2021, a public park was inaugurated merely 0.3km from my home in the semi-urban city of Sahiwal – a convenient 10-minute walk. However, the park's proximity to a predominantly male-dominated marketplace added a layer of complexity. Despite the grocery and utility stores being a mere 3-minute walk away, I had never visited the marketplace alone. My parents, adhering to societal norms, didn't permit me to visit the park without a chaperone. My mobility was largely limited within the space of my home, a situation reflective of the lives of many women in Pakistan. Thus, securing permission for daily walks in the park proved to be a five-month endeavour. Convincing a neighbouring girl to join me was a milestone moment, but an unexpected event threw a wet blanket on my joy. An elderly woman berated me in public for not covering my head, a non-legal but socially enforced practise in Pakistan. She blamed me for ruining the *Iman* (faith) of the men in the park. Despite being covered in a shawl due to the cold weather, I had removed the head covering briefly for comfort. Ironically, the men had been respectful of my presence, but I had received many glares of disapproval from elderly women. This unwarranted confrontation turned the park, initially a source of joy, into a hostile environment. Discouraged, I stayed away for weeks, highlighting how social expectations and shaming impact women's access to public spaces.

This complex predicament extends beyond public parks, influencing various aspects of women's lives including medical, educational, and leisure. Women in Pakistan grapple with limited mobility and are reliant on male relatives or financial means to access work and public spaces. Public spaces, specifically public transport are mired with men harassing women with impunity, and presumably 'safer' options of ride-share apps are economically inaccessible to many (Hoor-Ul-Ain 2020) (Sajjad et. al n.d) (Iqbal et. al 2020). Harassment by men on public transport is one of the biggest reasons why women's formal employment in Pakistan stands at a mere 20pc (Ebrahim 2023). My personal experiences as a Pakistani woman attest to these challenges as well.

However, women's mobility in Pakistan is not a simplistic male/female, public/private binary; it's a multifaceted social quagmire as evidenced through the anecdote above. Initiatives challenging existing norms are crucial to empowering women to navigate their environment independently and safely. This article delves into one such initiative: Women on Wheels, drawing insights from an expert interview with Ramlah Rehman, Project Manager of WoW at the Salman Sufi Foundation.[13] The Women on Wheels (WoW) project is a brainchild of public policy expert Salman Sufi in response to public discourse, especially by women's groups, in the public sphere. Launched in 2016 by the Lahore Traffic Police, WoW aims to equip women with the bike riding skills and resources needed to navigate the bustling streets of Pakistan. This article delves comprehensively into the context of gender and mobility in Pakistan, the WoW project, examining its inception, objectives, implementation model, impact, prospects for replication in other contexts as well as alternative campaigns encouraging women's mobility in Pakistan.

Gender and Mobility in Pakistan

The mobility predicament confronting Pakistani women is a complex tapestry intricately woven with regressive gender norms. One study revealed that a substantial 43% of men harbour

[13] https://salmansufifoundation.org/wow/

the belief that women should be confined to domestic spheres. (Minardi et al. 2021) This prevailing mindset poses formidable barriers for women, with 40% requiring approval from a family member to engage in paid employment outside the home, according to the 2019 Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) survey. Moreover, even with permission to work or leave the house, women face a lack of available transport options for independent travel. Bikes and motorcycles are considered taboo for women, and harassment concerns prevent access to public transport buses and wagons. These harassment concerns come from the conduct of drivers, conductors, and male passengers, with young female students experiencing relentless leering, catcalling, and groping. Women have to consider the time of day, exposure to stranger men, and distance to the nearest stop. Whereas switching to alternative modes such as rickshaws or higher-cost ride-sharing apps may place excessive financial stress on women which many can't afford. Such limited mobility greatly reduces women's access to education, work, and healthcare. (Tanaka & Muzone 2016) (Cheema et al. 2022) (Sajjad et al. n.d.) (Iqbal et al. 2020)

Purdah: Cultural constructs such as *purdah*/veil and *izzat*/honour become pivotal in shaping the mobility and contours of the seclusion of women. Often simplified as reductionist male control of sexuality and honour narratives, these norms exhibit a dynamic and negotiable nature, intertwined with the fluidity of gender roles and socio-economic distinctions. For example, in rural settings, the practise of seclusion is more pronounced among women from affluent, land-owning families, while in urban landscapes, it is the middle-class women who may not traverse beyond the confines of their homes. (Mughal 2019) (Mumtaz & Salway 2005)

Unveiling the symbolic nature of *purdah* it becomes apparent that it extends beyond a mere physical manifestation of seclusion. Women's *purdah*, as observed, is not solely determined by modest clothing and physical geography but rather by social geography. Taking modesty in clothing as default, married or elder women may interact with *biradari*/family men openly, but younger, unmarried women may face greater restrictions. Similarly, there is a discernible dissonance between these social boundaries and physical village geography, where women might embark on a lengthy 45-minute walk through fields to visit relatives but refrain from visiting a non-*biradari* house merely five minutes away without a chaperone. Mumtaz and Salway (2005) show how the chaperone can be another woman or a child, and "strong" women demonstrate pride and social status in moving around with chaperones. The presence of accompanying men or women from the family shows that she is valued by her family. Doing tasks alone in public may be seen as a mark of abandonment by family members. This symbolism elucidates the paradoxical nature of *purdah*, where strictly enforced rules of endogamy ostensibly limit sanctioned activity within the *biradari* (kinship) but, in practise, facilitate repeated intra-*biradari* social interactions. Thus, female mobility, both accompanied and independent, needs to be complexly situated within the cultural contexts of Pakistani society (Mumtaz & Salway 2005). Projects like WoW aim to encourage the independent mobility of women, however, women may choose to ride with a chaperone to flexibly negotiate the social context. For example, while I have been driving for many years, my parents do not permit me to drive alone in Sahiwal because of safety and "*log kya kahen gy/what would people say"* social judgment concerns. Nonetheless, after years of driving with my brother, sister, or mother, I found opportunities for independent driving and eventually found my parents relaxing their permission as their trust in me and their perception of social acceptance changed after seeing other women driving on the streets. Interestingly, they don't mind me driving alone in Lahore, a larger urban city, indicating the direct role of social perceptibility in family decisions on the autonomy of women. According to them, Lahore's *mahol* is different and more accepting of women in public spaces than Sahiwal's and one should adapt to the context of the community one is in. Thus, women may flexibly negotiate their autonomous access to public space depending on their family, community, and cultural contexts; and social change projects need time to see how women's lives evolve with increased access and opportunities.

Mahol: The constraints on women's mobility extend beyond cultural norms to encompass the broader social climate, known as *mahol*. *Mahol* encapsulates the abstract imaginary of levels of safety (physical and social respectability) of a space (Khajistan History 2023). Such phrases are common in cordoning off areas as safe or unsafe for women: *us jagah ka mahol kharab hy* (that place gives off problematic vibes) or *is muhalay men akeli aurat ky phirnay wala mahol ni hy* (this neighborhood isn't suitable for women to walk alone). *Mahol* is a subjective experience formed through the communal imaginary of what makes a place 'safe' or 'respectable' (Mumtaz & Salway 2005). In the middle-class Punjabi community, I grew up in, safe *mahol* for women was judged through the presence of other women in a male-dominated public space, lack of street harassment, or visible young male vagrants in a neighbourhood, whereas a respectable *mahol* was typically religious or culturally conforming social settings. Given that the perceptible *mahol* both serves to "protect" women physically and morally, any social setting with presumedly Western influence (i.e. young male-female intermingling, women wearing Western clothing, music, and dance spaces, etc.) may be perceived as morally unsafe *mahol* for women and thus deemed inappropriate for them to access. I can recall the insidiousness of using perceptions of *mahol* in determining major life decisions through numerous examples of parents refusing to send their daughters to universities in major cities like Lahore or Islamabad because of fear of corruption. A common phrase *larki hath sy nikal gai* (literally translated as the girl has escaped from our hands/the girl has been corrupted) is a common social shaming phrase for women who challenge cultural or social norms of respectability.

Thus, the mobility challenges faced by Pakistani women are deeply rooted in multifaceted factors, encompassing regressive gender norms, societal misperceptions, and cultural practises. The evolving landscape reflects not only a struggle against restrictive norms but also the negotiation of space and agency within the intricate social fabric. WoW project hopes that the concerted efforts of increasing women on two-wheelers on the streets would increase acceptance of women's independent presence in public spaces as well as boost their economic independence, which would, in turn, encourage other women to take up bikes and for people to see roads as safe *mahol* for women riders since many others are riding alongside them. The project thus intervenes by pushing social norms to adapt to the realities of the needs of women through women riding brightly coloured motorbikes with confidence, shocking public consciousness and forcing it to adjust to change. The journey towards women's empowerment and increased mobility necessitates such concerted efforts to dismantle barriers entrenched in cultural, religious, and legal realms.

Project Introduction: Women on Wheels Pakistan

The Women on Wheels project developed within the Special Reforms Unit of the Chief Minister's Office in Punjab, evolved into a full-fledged motorbike training program under the Lahore Traffic Police in 2016. In 2018 due to a change in government, it went on a brief hiatus, only to be revived in Sindh Province in November 2019, underscoring the resilience and adaptability of the initiative. From 2023 onwards, the National Commission on the Status of Women will be leading the project with an announced budget of 4476.17 million Pakistani rupees under the Prime Minister's initiatives (Shah 2023). The project has been supported by numerous renowned organizations including UNDP, Atlas Honda, UN Women, Interloop and Careem (SSF n.d.).

Salman Sufi, head of Punjab Govt's Strategic Reforms Unit, notes on its purpose: "Economic empowerment is dependent on mobility, and this was the cheapest way we could give women mobility" (Bangali 2018), However, the project goes beyond economic empowerment by including anti-harassment training in its curriculum, thus training women to take up public space more confidently.

Since its launch in 2016, the project has made significant strides, training over 30,000 women and girls to safely ride motorcycles on Pakistan's traffic-heavy roads. A pivotal aspect of WoW's impact lies in the distribution of 800 subsidized motorcycles across five districts in Punjab. The next phase of the project under NCSW aims to distribute 20,000 subsidized scooters and bikes to a diverse pool of participants including businesswomen, students, teachers, health workers, and those employed in government or semi-government institutions.

Painted in a distinctive pink hue, these bikes not only stand out but also discourage male relatives from appropriating them. The women are often donned in orange shirts or jackets, the colour of the UNiTE global campaign against gender-based violence. The project cleverly makes the connection between women's mobility, agency, and safety through its colour play.

Salman Sufi Foundation Women on Wheels Project

The Women on Wheels Model: Holistic Empowerment

The strength of the project is in its holistic empowerment model: training women to ride bikes thus increasing their mobility and access to public spaces, building their self-confidence through anti-harassment training, giving them vehicles to reduce economic barriers to mobility, and finally creating industry linkages to assist trained women to join the workforce. The holistic empowerment model contributes to the personal, professional, and self-empowerment of the participants. The phases of the project implementation are explained below:

Identification and Outreach: WoW's comprehensive outreach campaign leverages social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, along with influencer engagement. This concerted effort aims to identify females aged 18-50, with no limits on participant background. However, in certain cohorts with specific funding organizations, the participants were targeted groups. For example, with UNDP's partnership, the program worked

solely with participants from Lahore. With Interloop[14], the project trained university and college students in Faisalabad as well as Interloop employees. According to Ramlah Rehman, Project Manager of WoW at the Salman Sufi Foundation, the application process is kept simple with only a phone number or email and an identification document (CNIC or B-form) required to register. The team then reaches out to the applicants to confirm their participation and guides them through the process.

Scheduling and Planning: The participants are divided into cohorts which run five cycles per cohort of 15-20 days each. This phase also includes hiring trainers, finding, and setting up training grounds, and arranging training vehicles for the participants.

Motorcycle Training and Skill Development: Participants undergo rigorous training during phase 3. They are first trained on bicycles followed by scooters and motorbikes, thus equipping them with skills to ride three different vehicles and broadening their mobility prospects.

Empowerment Sessions: A unique component of the program is the empowerment sessions, which encompass traffic rules, basic motorcycle maintenance, and road safety. This equips participants not only with the technical skills necessary for safe riding but also instills a sense of confidence and autonomy.

One of the project's fundamental achievements lies in its addition of anti-sexual harassment training to its programming. The threat of sexual harassment greatly hinders women's access to public transport, and public spaces as well as work, educational, and play opportunities. Moreover, the trauma of being objectified and harassed may contribute to lower self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of shame (Awasthi 2017). WoW Participants are trained in the anti-harassment laws of the country and given tips on how to ride safely if they face harassment on the road.

Assistance in Licensing: WoW provides crucial support in obtaining learner's permits and permanent licences, ensuring that women can confidently take to the streets without unnecessary barriers.

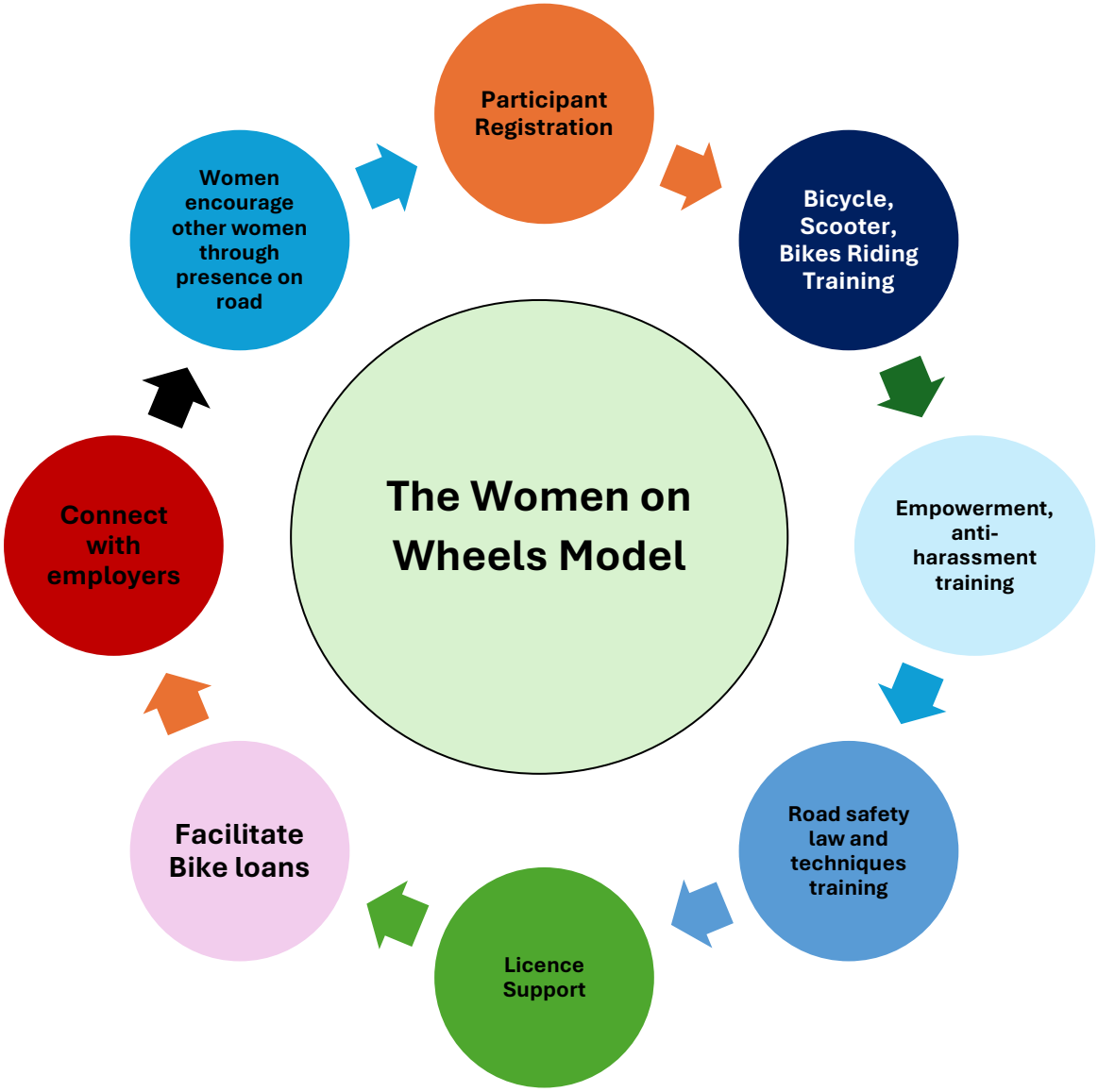
Subsidized Loan Provision: Upon completion of the training program, participants are offered subsidized loans to purchase their motorcycles or scooters. However, the number of vehicles available can be dependent on the funding and budgetary limitations of the program for that cohort and funding partner.

[14] The largest listed apparel company on Pakistan Stock Exchange and one of the world's largest hosiery manufacturer. https://interloop-pk.com/

Testimonials from program participants offer poignant verification to the transformative power of Women on Wheels. Qaisar, one such participant, articulated, "It helps us economically and it helps us emotionally...When I first started riding, I felt like I was flying high in the sky" (Bangali 2018).

Abbas, a 20-year-old with no male siblings, echoed this sentiment, stating, "I became a brother to my sisters. My father is a lot more relaxed now" (Bangali 2018).

Employment Assistance: The program goes a step forward and connects trained participants to employers such as food delivery companies, sales companies, etc., thus ensuring the training is put towards the economic empowerment of the participants. Approximately 30% of women trained by WoW are reported to have found employment in various sectors, including logistics, food delivery, and sales representation.



Discussion

WoW Project Manager Ramlah Rehman outlined the following challenges and observations which can serve as important reflections for future projects of this kind.

- **Funding, grants, and political institutions:** In the neoliberal NGO model of project-driven change, WoW team also struggled to consistently execute the project as it changed hands under various donors and funders. While grant management takes significant resources, donors may also set specific expectations from the program i.e., dictate specific target participants or eliminate a project element (subsidize bikes, etc.). On the other hand, working with the government in the politically unstable landscape of Pakistan also brings with it challenges that hinder proper and continuous execution and require careful maneuvering to keep the project running. WoW, under the Salman Sufi Foundation, has worked with the government, international organizations, and corporations to diversify its funding needs and retain autonomy over the project.
- **Expectation of free bikes:** Some participants discontinue their involvement due to an initial expectation of receiving bikes free of charge, rather than ones offered at a subsidized rate. Funding allocation challenges have further complicated the distribution of bikes, both subsidized and unsubsidized, leading to participant dropouts upon learning of this circumstance.
- **Male relatives appropriating bikes:** In some instances, male family members assume possession of the bikes, using them themselves, rather than allowing the intended female recipients to utilize them for their intended purpose. Ramlah mentioned this trend to be one of the reasons funders hesitate to support the subsidized bikes component of the project.
- **Parental consent concerns:** Securing parental consent for female participation in the program proves to be a formidable task. At times, the team had to resort to contacting families directly and even facilitating visits to the training facility of a family member to appease their concerns and obtain the necessary permissions.
- **Lack of communication channels:** Often, brothers wield disproportionate influence in determining whether their sisters may participate. Ramlah shared an anecdote of a girl whose brother assumed authority over her decision, conveying her disinterest in joining. The team subsequently conducted two follow-ups but couldn't access the girl directly, exemplifying the complexities of such situations where women do not control their communication channels i.e. cell phones.
- **Post-training hindrance to riding:** Families may permit women to undergo training but remain hesitant to grant permission for them to engage in actual riding activities on the road post-training, thus treating the training as a hobby or skill gained for emergencies.
- **Changing societal attitude:** Ramlah also observed a positive shift in family attitudes after witnessing their daughters' successful participation, leading them to extend support and encouragement to other women they know. She gave examples of fathers who were hesitant to approve their daughter's participation but once they saw the training ground, they agreed. She also relayed the story of a daughter who signed up for training whose mother had been trained by WoW in 2016 and given a bike, thus showing the intergenerational change in societal attitudes to women motorcycling.
- **Scooters over bikes:** Certain female participants have articulated a preference for scooters over motorcycles, attributing this inclination to the perceived 'feminine' appeal associated with scooters. WoW initially did not have scooters in its subsidized vehicles plan, but under NCSW, the press releases signal both scooters and bikes would be distributed, thus bolstering women's choice while empowering their mobility.
- **Religious group's criticism:** Another formidable challenge arises from certain religious groups in the country who denounce women riding as immodest and improper. Ramlah cited an instance involving a squash player in Peshawar who aspired to introduce the project in her city but was deterred by the inhospitable environment created by these groups. Women have resisted by highlighting their modest riding outfits to discard the

impropriety slander. Hijab or loose, cultural clothing are used by women to bolster their agency in such cases.

Public Reception of the Project

The project was largely met with the usual *bayhayahi* (vulgarity) condemnations from conservative groups and some social media users (Khawaja, 2016) (TheDaysprингPK 2023). While women faced harassment, and opposition from family members on choosing to ride, they vehemently expressed their determination to keep doing so: “You have to ignore all this. These comments are not important to me,” notes a girl riding her bike to college (Chughtai 2019). One father raised an interesting point on the benefits of riding motorbikes in comparison to public transport: “I think it’s better for all daughters to have their own transport, at least they are away from direct contact of men,” exemplifying the fluidity of the concept of *purdah* and honour depending on context.

However, despite the positive reception, it is important to note that the project has so far been executed in urban or semi-urban areas. In 2022, a cycling camp in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was cancelled because of threats by Jamaat-e-Islami, a conservative religious party, for promoting Western values of indecency and because of myths of cycling-breaking young girls’ hymens. KPK being a region afflicted by remnants of militancy, terrorism, and fundamentalism poses a harder challenge for projects like WoW to be executed in comparison to Karachi or Lahore. Thus, breaking barriers to women’s mobility does not have a homogenous solution in politically complex Pakistan. (Introvigne 2022).

Project Replication

Ramlah believed in the potential of the project and cited the soundness and replicability of the model. She shared that activists in India had reached out to WoW and expressed a desire to replicate the project in Mumbai with one distinction of electric scooters replacing motorbikes. Thus, exemplifying the flexibility of the project model as it is being replicated in other contexts and countries.

When asked about a best practise she would like to share, Ramlah mentioned how the establishment of a well-equipped training facility with proper signage, banners, and rest areas significantly enhanced the project's credibility and garnered increased dedication from participants. Initially, without this designated setup, the project was met with less serious consideration. Because the project moved from city to city or changed training grounds, this small detail might be overlooked as optional. However, she emphasized the infrastructure giving legitimacy to the project, contributing to family approval of women's participation as well as the commitment of the participants to the project.

UNDP shares the story of Farkunda Feroz: "I heard about this initiative through Facebook. I joined the training, which lasted for three months. They helped us with the licences." Said Farkhunda. "I received a lot of appreciation for this. I would encourage women to learn to ride bikes as well. It helps with mobility and freedom."

Similar Projects for Women's Mobility

Women's mobility interventions in Pakistan have been tackling the cultural, economic, and religious challenges and barriers through government, corporate, and grassroots initiatives. Some of these initiatives are outlined below:

Transport interventions: Various transport interventions have been executed in Pakistan to improve women's mobility. Some notable ones include Pink Bus, Zong Tabeer Project, and Pink Rickshaw. All three projects, launched by the government, Zong Corporation, and Environmental Protection Fund respectively, provide women's only transport services as an alternative to mired-with-harassment public transport. However, creating alternative women's transport services in a country in debt and seeing the massive departure of foreign capital investments means funding is inconsistent and not nearly enough. Moreover, gendered seclusion is a short-term answer to protect women from harassment and is not suited to be a long-term strategy for an inclusive society (Ebrahim 2023) (Middleton 2015) (FIA 2014).

Cycling rallies: Cycling is not foreign to Pakistanis but has class-based distinctions in usage. Rural men or men who cannot afford cars or bikes are typically seen with cycles, with women riding side-saddle behind them. However, as campaigns for green energy and women's mobility promote cycling and motorcycling as sustainable transport alternatives, the activity is catching on in Pakistan as well. Several grassroots riding groups such as Girls at Dhaba and Pink Riders training institute are leading the Bike for Change movement in Pakistan, encouraging, training, and promoting women's mobility through two-wheelers (Haq, 2023) (Sayeed, 2017). Pakistan's Cycling Federation held the 7th edition of the National Women, Men Road Cycling Competition in Peshawar in 2023, which went by without a hitch, despite taking place in KPK, the same region where Samar Khan's cycling camp had to be cancelled. (PakistanToday, 2023). Similarly, on International Women's Day, supported by Sindh Rangers, 150 women rode in a bike rally to promote women's mobility. These examples show that government support for women's mobility protects them in their reclamation of public space (Tribune. pk, 2022). Numerous corporations have also taken to funding and promoting women on two-wheelers through their

marketing as well as dedicated events such as Daraz WOW Women Week collaboration with Pink Riders 2021, Pepsi for Pakistan's Ride for Change rally 2023 which included several celebrities riding with local women in Karachi's largest biker women's rally etc. (Afzal 2023) (PakistanObserver 2022) (Tribune.pk 2023 b).

Conclusion: Towards a More Inclusive and Empowered Pakistan

Ensuring women's mobility and access to public spaces is essential in Pakistan. It upholds the fundamental principle of equality, affirming that women possess the same inherent dignity and rights as men to access public spaces for any reason they desire to do so. Restricting their movement curtails their autonomy, limiting their ability to make choices about their own lives, careers, and relationships. Denying women, the right to freely navigate public spaces perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, effectively denying them their full personhood. Granting women the freedom to move without fear or hindrance is a vital step towards realizing their intrinsic human rights, affirming their agency, and fostering a society that respects and values the inherent worth and potential of every individual, regardless of gender.

The Women on Wheels project stands as a testament to the transformative potential of initiatives aimed at challenging norms and providing equal opportunities. Through its innovatively holistic model, WoW is paving the way for a future where women can navigate public spaces with confidence, independence, and dignity. There is an urgent need for funding bodies and governments to unconditionally support such projects with trust in the impact of the holistic project model to support women's empowerment. I hope to see future WoW projects specifically catering to the needs of trans-women and women with disabilities as well. The Feminist movement in Pakistan has been pushing for legal and social gender equality and they are aware that without safe access to public spaces and mobility, women's ability to exercise their legal rights remains limited. Projects such as WoW can be a force for change and a promise for greater gender justice in Pakistan, inclusive of all its peoples. It should be improved upon and replicated to help break the social barriers women face. None of us are free until all of us are. Our liberations are intersectional and intertwined.

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Part Two

Women-Led Movements: Weaving the Tapestry of Collective and Personal Experiences

Chapter 4: Pedalling Towards Equality: Fancy Women Bike Ride Türkiye

Setenay Mutlu Adisönmez

When a woman rides a bicycle, it represents freedom to be outside the house without relying on anyone else. It also provides women with increased opportunities for socializing with others. Essentially, social equality between genders means that women have more visibility in society, breaking down taboos and freeing them from oppression. In its early days, the modern bicycle was not only a source of pleasure for women but also a driving force for societal change.

Historical Overview

Exploring the history of women cyclists in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Türkiye provides insight into societal progress and cultural changes for women in the country. To fully grasp the evolution of their roles in cycling, it is essential to examine significant historical moments. From the pioneering women who challenged societal norms in public spaces to the urban feminist cyclist movements, this section briefly touches on the journey of women cyclists and their impact on equality in Türkiye and beyond.

During the Ottoman Empire's Second Constitution Era (1908-1920), there was a surge of hope and excitement in society for newfound freedoms and civic engagement. Women and their bicycles were also expected to benefit from this atmosphere. Literary works depict how bikes provided women with social mobility and opportunities. In fact, there were photographs of women cycling in Istanbul, Izmir, and Thessaloniki that date back to the late 19th century (Kahraman 1996:660). It is important to note, however, that the use of bicycles by women was still limited and dependent on their socio-economic status and location. Çelik (2022)

In the late Ottoman period, religious fundamentalists and conservatives strongly opposed the idea of women cycling as a symbol of freedom. This cultural attitude was also reflected in the literature of the time, as seen in Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar's 1922 novel "A Marriage under the

Comet." The male protagonist, İrfan Galip, receives letters from an unknown woman, and in her first letter, we encounter a passage that touches on this issue.

One day, if I put on my shawl and jump out of our barn door on my brother's bicycle to catch the train towards Samatya, everyone will examine who I am. Not a single person will dare to marry me. No matter how angelic a girl you are. Riding a bike once in public is enough to make everyone hate you. Oh my God... what a country... what nonsense Gürpınar (2021)

In Ottoman society, bikes were viewed negatively as they were believed to harm the reproductive system and encourage liberal sexual attitudes among the public. A view that they borrowed from their Western conservative counterparts (see: Macy, 2011). However, despite the influence of a conservative and patriarchal culture, women gained new rights after the republic's foundation in 1923. (Kaya, 2009). They were no longer confined to traditional gender roles and were granted rights in the public sphere. Women were recognised as having the potential to transform society and were active in politics, education, and employment. With their noteworthy achievements in civil rights, women became symbols of the emerging society.

However, the overall portrayal of a woman on a bicycle has yet to be very prominent, with some exceptions. While women's association with bikes became prevalent during the 1930s, and there was a resurgence of cycling in the 1950s and 1960s, it declined in popularity in the 1980s. The image of female cyclists was relatively stagnant until the 2000s, except for a few instances, such as Hülya Koç's inspiring journey. Koç cycled through South America for nearly ten months, five years before the turn of the century. Her memoir, *Wind, Push Me,* encouraged many women to take up cycling (Yakan, 2020).

As we entered the 2000s, Türkiye experienced a significant resurgence. More women are now riding bicycles, and some are even embarking on cycling adventures around the globe. Various initiatives, such as Fancy Women Bike Ride, Women on Bicycle, and Chain Breaking Women, have emerged to support this trend (Çelik 2022). Female athletes are also making their mark in competitions. Furthermore, public institutions are now initiating projects focused on women and bicycles, signalling a positive shift towards gender equality.

The Fancy Women Bike Ride: A Celebration of Joy, Liberation, and Sisterhood

Cycling is an excellent way for women to increase visibility and engage with their community. Starting from this viewpoint, Fancy Women Bike Ride (FWBR) is a significant social movement that originated in Türkiye and has spread globally. It was started by Sema Gür, a history teacher and cycling activist, in 2013 to mark World Car-Free Cities Day. The main objectives of this event program are to promote bicycle policies in Türkiye and other countries and to make women and girls more visible in public spaces. According to FWBR's official declaration, "When women are visible in public spaces, they are better able to claim their rights." (Süslü Kadınlar Bisiklet Turu, n.d)

FWBR is an event that highlights the empowering nature of cycling and encourages more women to choose this mode of transportation in urban areas. The ride also seeks to make women more visible in public and draw attention to femininity-related issues (Dalçiçek and Arslan 2022:21-24). Additionally, the organisers utilise various feminist approaches to highlight women's societal demands during the events.

Their first press release (2013) contained the following statements:

> We have convened here for what reason? We are here as women who want to be seen. In our country, there are countless women who are unable to be seen... When women are visible in society, society thrives! Women should be able to ride on the roads without fear and be visible in all aspects of society. Our aim is to demand respect for bicycles, respect

for women, and respect for female cyclists... This is the reason we have gathered here. (İlhan, 2023)

The event attendees use various slogans hung on their bicycles each year to convey social messages. Some of these slogans include "The bicycle is freedom," "Bicycle suits

women best," and "Women take to the streets" (Mertol et al., 2022). Event participants expressed that this form of public expression can contribute to a better understanding of collective identities, feelings, and declarations made during their rides.

Every year on World Car-Free Cities Day since 2013, FWBR hosts an event for women that is both attention-grabbing and empowering. Their manifesto states that women will gather in public squares with their bicycles to showcase that cycling is accessible to everyone and that it can be done with fancy style. Women can better assert their rights by increasing their visibility in public spaces. Cycling is also seen as a means of promoting women's participation in society and a new way to interact with urban areas. FWBR is a volunteer-run event by women for women to encourage the freedom that cycling can bring and inspire more women to choose cycling as a mode of transportation in cities. (Süslü Kadınlar Bisiklet Turu, n.d.)

According to the timetable on FWBR's digital platform, Fancy Women Bike Ride was officially launched on 22 September 2013, with around 250 participants attending the event. Sema Gür initially announced on her Facebook page that the FWBR event would occur. Women dressed in their finest clothes and gathered at İzmir's Konak Square. They cycled 3 km, decorating their bicycles with flowers and ribbons. The media and news programs started covering the event in 2014, leading to a significant increase in the number of participants. In 2015, Pınar Pinzuti supported Sema Gür in organising the event simultaneously in ten cities, which continued to grow in popularity, including İzmir, İstanbul, Ankara, Adana, Eskişehir, Marmaris, and Bodrum.

In 2016, thousands of women gathered in 28 cities to demand that their municipalities create and implement suitable bicycle policies. The ride continued to grow, simultaneously organised in 50 cities in 2017. Regarding the year 2018, the EU Mobility and Transport Commission recognised the event as an International Women's Movement held in 70 cities across Türkiye, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. The Copenhagenize Index 2019 announced this event, which expanded its impact every year, as one of the most successful grassroots movements in the world. It was held simultaneously in 115 cities worldwide in 2019.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants opted to drive in small groups with friends within their own neighbourhood instead of mass driving in 2020. In that year, a global event took place in more than 150 cities across 25 countries. The event aimed to promote the idea of a "car-free Sunday", and participants used a common hashtag (#FWBR2020) on social media to convey their demand. Similarly, FWBR was held simultaneously in over 150 cities in 30 countries in 2021. Moreover, the Berlin Senatorship of Environment, Transport and Climate Protection awarded the Berlin initiative to FWBR in 2021. The Berlin Fancy Women Bike Ride initiative was chosen as the 'Environmental Transport Movement' of the year, along with two other projects (Tosun, 2021). Moreover, The Guardian and The Sunday Times newspapers featured Fancy Women Bike Ride on September 19th and 21st 2021, respectively, each with a photo (Fidler, 2021) (The Sunday Times, 2021).

In 2022, there was a significant turning point for the event as the United Nations (UN) recognised FWBR. The event organisers, Sema Gür and Pınar Pinzuti, were awarded the UN Special Award for World Bicycle Day for their contributions to promoting the use of bicycles. FWBR was held simultaneously in multiple cities worldwide in 2023 to highlight the significance of women's visibility and perception in society. As social media has played an essential role in digitally organising social movements and activist events, thousands of women have increased

the visibility of events through hashtags including #skbt2023, #fwbr2023 and #fancywomenbikeride. (Süslü Kadınlar Bisiklet Turu, n.d.)

Source: Yücel (2023)

FWBR mobilises women from diverse backgrounds for environmental and feminist activism in their local communities every year in September. Currently, FWBR is working towards redesigning cities to prioritise the well-being of people and promote liveable, healthy, and bicycle-friendly environments. As part of their efforts, Fancy Women Bicycle Ride is today organised in 200 cities and 35 countries (Anadolu Agency, 2023). The ride aims to highlight the importance of bicycles in daily life and make women more visible while enabling them to express themselves and advocate for safer cycling infrastructure. It is important to note that even though the event occurs once a year, it, again, aims to promote women's cycling as a part of their daily routine.

In this sense, the FWBR movement has played a crucial role in women's liberation in Türkiye and beyond. Bicycles have enabled many women to challenge societal norms and integrate themselves better into their urban environments. Cycling provides women with the freedom to travel independently from one place to another. Also, it empowers them to gain self-confidence and take more independent actions in various aspects of their lives. FWBR is also making significant contributions to the visibility of women in several countries across multiple fields. For instance, Pinzuti highlights that Turkish immigrant women generally organise events overseas, which helps in their integration into the host country while also showcasing their individual profiles.

As previously mentioned, the FWBR initiative, which was introduced a decade ago, has received numerous domestic and international awards for its ingenuity and accomplishments. One of its notable achievements was winning the UN Special Award for World Bicycle Day in 2022 (Erbalaban Yılmaz, 2022). The UN awarded the organisers of FWBR, Sema Gür and Pınar Pinzuti, for promoting cycling on World Bicycle Day, which was declared on June 3, 2018, with member states' votes.

Mertol's qualitative research on women's visibility in urban spaces provides insightful analyses for the future of the FWBR. Through focus group discussions, the study found that participants are optimistic about the potential for increased awareness and functional cities for future generations. They believe there should be a shift towards creating safer and more visible roads, allowing women to use bicycles more freely. This transformation would benefit women and children with access to more liveable cities (Mertol et al., 2022).

Other Contemporary Female Cyclist Initiatives and Their Contributions

Bike initiatives and movements are growing more diverse and vibrant in the country. In addition to FWBR, two more contemporary examples of environmentalist women's movements that promote women's involvement in public life with bicycles are the Women on Bicycle Initiative and the Chain Breaking Women.

Source: Suslu Kadinlar Bisiklet Turu (2022)

In 2015, seven women established the Women on Bicycle Initiative, which now boasts over 6,000 members and fosters a sense of solidarity among women who enjoy cycling in Türkiye.

This initiative aims to promote using bicycles as a means of daily transportation and create a sense of solidarity among women who aspire to become cyclists (Women on Bicycle Initiative, n.d.). They organise events in cities across seven regions of Türkiye, bringing together women who share the motto "My Bicycle My City". During these events, they listen to stories from fellow female cyclists and discuss their accomplishments. To illustrate, "My Bicycle My City Film" showcases the stories of women who use bicycles in their daily lives in seven regions of the country (Cyclistmag, 2019). The film offers a unique perspective on the existence of bicycles solely from a woman's point of view, including their experiences in business, social spheres, society, family, and relationships. It serves as a document that highlights the connection between women, bicycles, life, and the city.

In addition to film screenings, the initiative also organises women's cycling meetings, cycling events, and training sessions for those who are new to cycling.

The Chain Breaking Women collective is another remarkable association that has emerged in recent years to encourage women to use bicycles for women's solidarity and empowerment (Inside Turkey News, 2021). Since January 2019, they have formed a cycling women's solidarity group with the mission of helping all women overcome physical and mental obstacles and restoring the lost spirit of sisterhood. As of January 2022, the group has become the Chain

Breaking Women Association (Chain Breaking Women, n.d.). The association's primary goal is not only to teach women how to ride a bicycle but also to boost their self-confidence and empower them to achieve what they once thought was impossible. The group aims to create a solidarity network that can spread throughout Türkiye. The women in the association are committed to sharing their knowledge and providing free bicycle training. They also train women and appoint those who are very committed as "bicycle ambassadors" who can give cycling training to other women in other places and carry the spirit of solidarity. To date, the association has provided voluntary bicycle training to over 400 women (Cyclistmag, 2020). They also offer free training to their bicycle ambassadors on bicycle repair, technical information, and business development models using bicycles.

Conclusion

Throughout history, women have faced numerous constraints when it comes to accessing public spaces and asserting their presence outside traditional roles. During a time when women were not allowed to participate in sports and were expected to confine themselves to household chores, the advent of cycling provided a means for women to break free from societal expectations and assert their independence. In addition, women organised several other accomplishments related to cycling. Despite being deemed "immoral and unhealthy" by supposed experts, women persisted in wearing trousers, travelling independently, and fighting for their rights. Cycling has also been a significant turning point for women's transportation and visibility in public spaces in Türkiye. This piece briefly explains the origins of the Fancy Women's Bike Ride and the event's overall contribution to promoting gender equality and women's visibility in the public sphere in Türkiye.

Fancy Women Bike Ride has evolved into a global movement and garnered widespread attention. Beginning with 250 women in Izmir, this event has expanded to numerous countries and cities worldwide for over a decade, inspiring women with its eco-feminist ethos. As a result, there was a rise in the utilisation of bicycles, new bike paths were constructed, and damaged or outdated roads were restored. Furthermore, it demonstrated that bicycles are not solely for men and encouraged women of all ages to ride them, leading to many women hitting the streets on two wheels (Mertol et al. 2022:1371).

Lastly, initiatives such as Fancy Women Bike Ride, Women on Bicycle, and Chain Breaking Women not only demonstrate how women can reclaim public space through cycling but also serve as a blueprint for future movements.

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Chapter 5: Pedalling for Change: Women of Afghanistan Championing Freedom and Rights on Two Wheels[15]

Homa Hoodfar

Feresht Mehraeen, first in the line, competes with other Afghan cyclists at the Women's Road Championships of Afghanistan in Switzerland in October 2022. Source: CTW News

In countries like Iran and Afghanistan, women's cycling is not just a sport; it is a political statement regardless of the cyclist's intention. Cycling is a path to demanding gender equality and empowering women. It allows young women to envision roles beyond the traditional confines of home and domesticity. They seek the right to cycle, to be in public spaces, and to bring about changes to women's restricted life options. They instinctively realise that bicycles can be vehicles for profound social change in conservative cultures that often erroneously use religion to justify hostility toward women demanding more options in their lives than domesticity.

Women in Afghanistan began cycling in public spaces during the socialist regime in the 1980s, but the war and subsequent civil conflict among different groups of mujahedeen's, culminating in Taliban rule in 1996, put an end to all sporting dreams. The Taliban banned education for women and economic activities, confining them to their homes and dashing their hopes for a better, peaceful life. With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the establishment of the American-backed state, which brought relative security to many parts of Afghanistan, young women resumed their dreams of cycling despite the hostile environment and traditions that viewed women as belonging solely to the domestic sphere.

This was no easy task as they lacked support from state institutions, the public, and often even their families. What made the women's efforts even more praiseworthy was that they were

[15] The information presented here has been gathered from the sources footnoted, along with my observations and conversations with athletes over the past two decades.

not concentrated only in larger cities, where people were more exposed to other cultures and diverse gender roles, but many in smaller towns also joined cycling despite the challenges.

The paths many women took to become cyclists are vastly different from what we typically think of cyclists in most places around the world. Those who dared to dream of cycling simply wanted to learn to ride, and most did not even imagine that one day they would own a bicycle. They were lucky if their brother or a family member who had a bike would let them borrow it and learn to ride, usually in the compound of their home or somewhere away from the watchful eyes of neighbours. However, many, once they experienced the pleasure of riding, they could not give it up.

The story of the now-famous cycling sisters, Fariba and Yulduz Hashimi is not an unusual one. One day, when Fariba and Yulduz were 14 and 17, they saw an ad for a local cycling race and decided to take part.[16] However, they faced several obstacles. The most crucial one was that they did not know how to ride, and the second was that neither of them had a bicycle. They borrowed their neighbour's bike, and after a few hours and some tumbles, they got the hang of it and started to prepare themselves.

The next and far more formidable challenge was to keep it a secret from their family and neighbours in their conservative northern province bordering Turkmenistan. No one, including their father, a medical doctor, and their mother, thought women would ride a bicycle in their Faryab town. Such an action was considered a stigma and would probably push them out of the marriage market.

Rukhsar Habibzai, who at the age of 22 acted as the coach for the women's national cycling team, fell in love with cycling at the age of nine. She managed to learn using other people's bikes and cherished the feeling of freedom it gave her. She told a Guardian reporter that riding a bike made her feel like she had wings and could go anywhere; it was nourishment for her soul. Since they lived in the restive southeastern province of Ghazni, her parents did not always approve. However, once they moved to Kabul in 2012, it became easier, and she discovered other women who were training and a team she could join.[17]

Even in Kabul, riding was not easy. Many cyclists explained how men threw stones and rotten food at them as they rode. Others tried to push them off the road with their cars or bikes, sometimes they were even injured, yet they persevered. They developed strategies to minimize hostility, such as not venturing out alone, always riding in groups or at least pairs, and cycling very early in the morning around sunrise, returning by eight o'clock when the work and school day started.

The dangers have been more serious than just name-calling and thrown stones. Once women became known for their cycling and "breaking gender norms," the Taliban, who were active and carried out assassinations in many areas, began sending threatening notes and threats to their lives. Many women felt compelled to either leave the country or stop cycling, at least temporarily.

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[16] BBC News. (2023). *Cycling sisters defy the Taliban to achieve Olympic dream*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c720jxej1ewo

[17] The Guardian. (2021, July 27). *'We're so proud of her': Afghanistan's gutsy female cyclists ready to cheer on Masomah Ali Zada*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/27/were-so-proud-of-her-afghanistans-gutsy-female-cyclists-ready-to-cheer-on-masomah-ali-zada

Afghan Girl Cycling (Source: Shannon Gal Pin)

Despite constant harassment and a lack of support from the government and the office of physical education, women established several cycling teams in both large and small cities. Against all odds, they participated in the Asian Women's Cycling Championship in 2013 and continued to compete in Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and South Korea in 2014. Winning was not their primary goal; rather, being present and counted as women from Afghanistan was far more significant. They saw themselves as for the next generation. This spirit led Afghanistan's women's cycling team to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, recognizing their courage to push for change and open doors for other women despite conservative hostility.[18] For women in Afghanistan, cycling was never just a sport; it was a pathbreaker for others and future generations. Many struggled against their own families to cycle, while others did so without their conservative families' knowledge.

Despite the troubles, disapproval from family members, and abuse from strangers, cycling among women had grown in popularity. What started as a tiny group within a decade had expanded to a 220-strong female contingent within the cycling federation. There were at least seven established provincial women's teams and many more informal teams before the second Taliban took over in 2021. There was an annual women's race held in Kabul every summer. Women did not necessarily get involved to join the national team, says Habibzai; they did it for pleasure and fun, simply because they could, and in the process, they became role models for others.[19]

The story of Masomah Ali Zada illustrates this struggle. After spending her early years in Iran, where women's cycling had been a political debate since the 1990s, she returned to Kabul.

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[18] National Geographic. (n.d.). *Afghan cycles: Pushing gender and cultural barriers on two wheels*. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/afghan-cycles-pushing-gender-and-cultural-barriers-on-two-wheels

[19] The Guardian. (2021, July 27). *'We're so proud of her': Afghanistan's gutsy female cyclists ready to cheer on Masomah Ali Zada*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/27/were-so-proud-of-her-afghanistans-gutsy-female-cyclists-ready-to-cheer-on-masomah-ali-zada

There, she worked as a sports teacher and started cycling with other women despite harassment. As she gained recognition, she was invited to join the newly formed national team. However, as she became a prominent role model for young women, she also became a target for threats from the Taliban and other conservative forces.[20] In 2017, she and her family had to flee to France, where she studied civil engineering. Despite the challenges, cycling remained her passion, and she dedicated her free time to it.

Olympics Sports (Source: BBC)

She had already participated in some regional competitions in Asia, but her dream was to compete in the Olympics. She wanted to be a role model for other Afghan women, showing them that it is not impossible to follow their dreams, even if traditions do not sanction them. She learned after years of lobbying and campaigning by UNHCR and refugees, the IOC committee in 2016 opened a new category for refugees of various backgrounds, allowing them to participate in the Olympics if they were skilled in their sport.[21] Working with host National Olympic Committees, they identified refugee athletes who might be eligible for scholarships to help them train, not just for the Olympics but also to develop their sporting careers and build their futures. The first refugee Olympic team of 10 in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro and the numbers had gone up to 29 for the Tokyo Olympics. The athletes represented the global population of displaced people. Masomah worked hard and, step by step, managed to join the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 as an exiled woman from Afghanistan.

The sportswomen in Afghanistan, particularly the small and courageous cycling teams, were ecstatic and glued to their televisions, watching one of their own overcome all odds to be part of the Tokyo Olympics. Masomah was a huge inspiration. Although her love for cycling eventually led her to leave Afghanistan under life threat from the Taliban and join the Refugee Olympic Team, she still represented the women of Afghanistan. Furthermore, she was invited to

[20] Olympics.com. (n.d.). *Masomah Ali Zada: A refugee cyclist's journey to the Tokyo Olympics*. https://olympics.com/en/news/masomah-ali-zada-refugee-tokyo-olympics

[21] Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Refugee Olympic Team at the Olympics*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee_Olympic_Team_at_the_Olympics

join the IOC's Refugee Olympic Committee, established to provide ongoing support to refugees through sport.

This enormously empowered women cyclists and women in general in Afghanistan, despite the uncertainty of their future. American and international forces had already announced they would leave in 2021. Through many rounds of negotiations, deliberately excluding the government of Afghanistan, the U.S. effectively invited the Taliban back to take over the country after 20 years of fighting them, at a tremendous cost of countless human lives. While the Americans announced that the Taliban had changed, everyone, friends and foes alike, knew that the Taliban had not changed, particularly regarding their gender ideology. It was popular knowledge that the Taliban had targeted and killed many women advocates or forced them into exile for fear of their and their families' lives. The Taliban had merely improved their public relations to some extent. Their taking power emboldened them as they viewed themselves as victorious over the most advanced military in the world and almost immediately issued.

The disastrous exit of U.S. and international forces in 2021, which had initially justified their 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, left many cyclists, particularly those who were known to the public, under threat. Many had to seek refuge in other countries, aware of the Taliban's previous rule in the 1990s when girls' education was banned, women's economic activities were restricted, and women and men were publicly stoned and executed. The Taliban's return was a nightmare for these cyclists, whose history of cycling posed a serious threat to their lives. Many went into hiding, destroying their equipment, photos, and letters of appreciation in hopes of saving their own lives and those of their families. With the support of the international community and cycling associations, an estimated 125 out of the 220 known women cyclists sought refuge in various countries.[22] They landed in many different countries, including Switzerland, Canada, Italy, Britain, and the United States. Yet, other cyclists went to neighbouring and Asian countries, leaving behind their families and loved ones.

Najila Sakhizada holds the Afghanistan flag after racing at the Women's Road Championships of Afghanistan in Switzerland in October 2022 (Source: CTV News)

The women cyclists and many others who left Afghanistan faced the challenge of trying to fathom and digest the events while simultaneously adjusting to refugee life in a new language and culture. Despite these formidable tasks, they remained committed to their struggle for gender equality and the empowerment of future generations. Driven by their unwavering determination to continue their vision, some cyclists found each other across borders and formed teams to continue their cycling mission. They mobilized and lobbied their host countries and cycling associations to pressure the IOC and other international sports associations to allow them to participate in different international sporting events, representing Afghanistan and

[22] Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). (n.d.). *The UCI supports Afghan cycling community and helps with the evacuation of Afghan athletes.* https://www.uci.org/pressrelease/the-uci-supports-afghan-cycling-community-and-helps-with-the-evacuation-of/7fgcTYmMdGyNZ51duXZw0H

reminding the world not to forget the plight of Afghan people, especially women living under Taliban rule.

Their first international success came with Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). The women cyclists from Afghanistan were supposed to participate in the 2021 annual UCI race, but due to the chaos and lack of security after the disgraceful and chaotic exit of NATO and American forces, the collapse of the government, and the return of the Taliban, they could not participate. Yet, the cyclists resolved not to let the world forget the plight of Afghan people under the Taliban. Through dedicated mobilization and constant networking with cycling associations and women's organizations UCI organised and hosted 49 Afghan cyclists in exile from several different countries to participate in a special event for Afghan women cyclists during the popular annual Women's Road Championships in Aigle, Switzerland, in October 2022.

The annual Women's Road Championships, established in 1958 to promote cycling for women, garnered considerable worldwide coverage, which was exactly why the Afghan women cyclists focused on this event. The UCI organised a special circuit ride in the high-altitude mountainous area of Switzerland (total: 57 km with a 144 m difference in altitude) for the 49 women residing in several European and North American countries. Among the 49 women were several prominent cyclists, including Masomah Ali Zada, who, as mentioned above, had fled Afghanistan under threat from the Taliban and fundamentalists for cycling in 2017 and had participated in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as part of the refugee team.

Fariba Hashimii wins title, Yulduz Hashimi secures silver, Zahra Rezayee bronze in Aigle at the Women's Road Championships of Afghanistan 2022 (Source: Maxime Schmid)

There were also efforts by cyclists and women's organizations, including WLUML, to organise a cyclist demonstration in major cities of Europe and North America on the anniversary of the catastrophic return of the Taliban in August 2023. While the idea was welcomed, the actual demonstration did not occur due to limited resources and limited time. However, their continued lobbying and mobilizing for the cause of women led the IOC to allow the cycling team to participate in the 2024 Paris Olympics under the three-coloured Afghanistan flag, not under the

white flag of the Taliban, who are banned from participating in the Olympics due to their discriminatory policies toward women. The team was made up of three men and three women, a deliberate gesture of gender equality. The women's team includes sprinter Kamia Yousufi,[23] who lives in exile in Australia, and the two cyclist sisters Fariba and Yulduz Hashimi. Fariba Hashimi finished the road race in 4:10:47, ranking 75th, and while Yulduz Hashimi did not finish (DNF) the road race, she placed 26th in the time trial with 44:29.13, which is a respectable position for a self-trained duo. Kamia Yousufi ran the Women's 100m in 13.42 seconds, ranking 9th.

They hope their performance in the Paris Olympics—or even just their presence—helped push back against the idea that women and girls in Afghanistan have no place in the world of professional sports. In this context, cycling has become an arena for addressing discrimination and promoting gender equality and empowerment, even though the journey remains challenging.

[23] Olympics.com. (n.d.). Kimia – Paris 2024 Athlete Profile. https://olympics.com/en/paris-2024/athlete/kimia; Axios. (2024, August 5). Olympic athletes navigating world conflicts and representing their countries. https://www.axios.com/2024/08/05/olympic-athletes-world-conflicts-countries.

Chapter 6: Women Cycling and Islam: Diverging Debates in Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia

Ghazaleh Ebnenasir

Introduction

I have a vivid memory of my first bicycle ride, a moment when, despite my dad's watchful eye from behind, I experienced an extraordinary sense of solitude and freedom. In those fleeting seconds before my gentle tumble, it felt as if I existed in a world of my own, unobserved by anyone. The joy I felt arose from the realization that this simple two-wheel device could take me beyond my usual boundaries, offering a newfound sense of freedom. More than just a means of transportation, a bicycle becomes a tool for exploration and independence during childhood.

As I grow older, the benefits of a bicycle become more apparent. Beyond contributing to physical health, cycling promotes motivation, aids in stress management, and contributes to environmental conservation by reducing air pollution. Regrettably, during my adolescent years, I came to understand that, for women in Iran, these benefits have remained elusive. This challenge arises from cultural norms aiming to limit women's presence in public spaces and the more stringent restrictions imposed on women in the name of religion over the past 44 years since the Islamic revolution.

Under the governance of the Islamic Republic, women have been systematically deprived of numerous rights, many of their basic human rights have been breached, and outdoor exercise including cycling has been particularly constrained. The right of women to cycle has been entangled with Islamic morality, a contentious point subject to scrutiny and restrictions imposed by societal norms and governmental policies. It was in this context that I wondered if such restrictions are placed on women in other Muslim-majority countries. This raised questions about the state of women's cycling in these countries. Does Islam genuinely prohibit women from cycling, and if so, why is this not the case in other Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world?

In this paper, I briefly explore the history of the bicycle and cycling in Iran to shed light on the public discourse on women's right to cycle in Iran which in practise places restrictions on their participation in public spaces and public roads. I will explore the multifaceted challenges we face as women, examining the societal and regime's ideological and religious perspectives that contribute to their attempt to restrict women's autonomy and access to the public. Given that Islam frequently has been invoked as a justification, I also examine the situation of women's cycling in two other Muslim-majority countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. By delving into the current situation in Iran and the authorities' stance on women cycling, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of the obstacles that women face in their struggle to establish their rights as equal citizens and claim their fundamental human rights and freedom.

Bicycles and Women in Iran: A Historical Journey from Past to Present

The Qajar Dynasty (179 - 1925): During the Qajar era, the introduction of bicycles to Iran marked an interesting chapter in the country's history. The British Embassy employees were the first to bring these two-wheeled wonders to the country. Two boys aged 15-16, sons of British embassy employees, rode these bicycles in Tehran and captured people's attention. In the cultural context of that time, people labeled them "devil's children". They were scared and confused to watch these blonde youths with bare legs, riding a seemingly self-propelled contraption which led people to associate them with supernatural force and consider the bicycle as the "Devil's two-wheeler".

The arrival of bicycles in Iran during the Qajar era was met with a mixed sense of mystery and resistance to change, highlighting the clash between traditions and the technological advancement of the time. Over time, people gradually became accustomed to bicycles, and affluent individuals started purchasing and using them. There is no evidence suggesting that women in Iran publicly used bicycles during the Qajar period, which is understandable given the restrictive culture of that time. Women were primarily expected to stay at home and not engage in activities outside the domestic sphere. Therefore, naturally, in that context, it would not have been acceptable for women to be seen riding bicycles in public. However, sometimes the wives and daughters of Qajar's King played with bicycles in the palace yards for entertainment. Additionally, there is a photo of Naser al-Din Shah's daughter on a bicycle, considered the first photograph of an Iranian woman on a bicycle.[24]

Naser al-Din Shah's daughter on bicycle. (Source: Wikipedia)

The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925 1979): During the Pahlavi era, bicycles gained widespread popularity and became a common mode of transportation among the Iranian people. Although bicycles initially entered the country through Tehran, their popularity quickly spread to other cities such as Isfahan and Yazd. The Pahlavi era marked a notable shift towards modernization and change in Iran, allowing for increased women's participation in various domains, including sports. While the regime was trying to open spaces for women by organizing competitions and encouraging their presence in national, regional, and international cycling events, little was done to facilitate general societal acceptance of women cycling (Figures 17 and 18). Consequently, it remained uncommon for women to feel secure riding on public roads unless accompanied by male family members, and cycling, despite being engaged in as a sport, did not evolve into a means of transportation in urban areas. Although there were no legal prohibitions, the main deterrent for

[24] Women cycling in Iran (Farsi Wikipedia) (دوچرخه‌سواری در ایران - ویکی‌پدیا، دانشنامهٔ آزاد 2023)

Women's Cycling Champions 1958 (Source: ParsTimes)

women cyclists was street harassment, which significantly prevented their access to roads and public spaces.

The Islamic Republic of Iran: After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the status of women underwent a profound transformation. The country transitioned into a fully Islamic state governed by strict Islamic principles, according to the state's authorities' interpretation. Within this new framework, women became both subjects and symbols of Islamic morality, their bodies serving as a stage where various political and ideological dynamics played out. Safeguarding women's chastity was seen as preserving the Islamic identity of the cities and, consequently, the entire country. In this context, recreational sports and leisure activities for women were thought to be contrary to Islamic values and morally decadent and, as a result, deemed unnecessary and prohibited. In the first years after the revolution, it was hard to find support from officials to promote women's sports and make them more accepted because many people saw them as going against the new Islamic norms (Shahrokni, 2019) (Hoodfar, 2015). Women's cycling in Iran continues to pose an ongoing challenge, despite the absence of legal constraints or prohibitions under Islamic law.

During my research, I discovered that even in Western countries during the initial phases of bicycle usage by women, both religious individuals and, more surprisingly, some feminists expressed their opposition to women cycling. They labelled it as unladylike, unchristian, and a disgrace to the church. Their concerns centred around the fear that bicycles might alter women's societal roles and promote independence. Additionally, debates emerged regarding the perceived negative impact of cycling on women's health and concerns related to sex and reproductive abilities, although no evidence or research was accompanying these assertions. The debates about dress codes and clothing issues associated with cycling were also significant points of controversy during that time. In those days, women's clothing prioritized beauty over comfort. The typical attire, including long skirts, corsets, and layers of undergarments, was unsafe for activities like cycling and posed a safety risk. Social norms emphasized modesty, leading to opposition against practical clothing like pants for women due to its challenge to traditional gender roles and expectations. For instance, in the United States, resistance to women wearing pants originated from fears of eroding traditional gender roles, losing women's modesty in clothing, and potentially resulting in a greater presence in public spaces (Macy, 2011). This is when I realised that these restrictions do not only apply to Islam; we encountered similar challenges for women's cycling in Western countries. The common thread here is the control of women and the limitation of their public presence.

Religious Fatwas and Leaders' Orders

In Iran, there is no specific legal prohibition against women cycling. However, religious scholars and leaders enforce bans on women using bicycles in urban public spaces when women undertake a remarkable action related to cycling. Notably, in September 2016, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, explicitly declared, "By riding bicycles, women often attract the attention of male strangers and expose society to debauchery, and thus contravene women's chastity, and it must be abandoned" (Radio Farda 2017). Over the years, numerous authorities in Iran, representing diverse political and religious stances, have issued orders banning women from cycling, primarily grounded in Islamic Sharia.

Although there is no official law against women's cycling, the morality police have the authority to stop women while cycling. Personal experiences underscore the impact of these restrictions. For instance, two years ago in Isfahan, while cycling along the Zayandeh Rud River

with a cousin a group of police officers with “sisters” approached us. They were filming us with cameras and treated us as if we were criminals, demanding our documents and threatening to confiscate our bikes. Their criticism centred on the claim that our clothing was not by Islamic standards and was considered sensual. Despite enduring humiliation and threats, the intervention of an elderly couple in the park and our written commitment not to cycle again secured our release.

However, if you believe that these incidents can deter Iranian women from advocating for their rights, you are mistaken. Despite the imposed restrictions and challenges, women persist in riding bicycles in various cities, demonstrating resilience and resistance. History has taught us that compliance only leads to our disappearance. As highlighted by Dr. Hoodfar in the book *Women’s Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts*, contemporary Muslim women have learned from centuries of struggle that public visibility serves as the initial step in securing their rights as citizens and resisting societal constraints (Hoodfar, 2015:44). The resolve to continue cycling despite adversity serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of Iranian women in their pursuit of equality and freedom.

Women’s Cycling in Malaysia and Indonesia Compared to Iran

Malaysia and Indonesia are neighbouring countries with Muslim-majority populations. In both nations, riding bicycles has long been an inexpensive and flexible mode of transportation for women. There are only slight gender differences in the use of bicycles and few negative views toward women riding bicycles. However, in certain religious regions such as West Java and Aceh in Indonesia, it is still seen as an inappropriate and unacceptable activity for women, and it is considered unladylike. According to a study conducted in Indonesia, the reasons for and uses of bicycles among women vary, particularly across social classes. For many middle-class women, it has become a pathway to a healthy lifestyle and exercise. Among working-class women in Indonesia, particularly those employed in textile and plastic factories, cycling is a prevalent means of commuting. Additionally, many women who work as vendors use bicycles to transport and sell their goods (Figures 4). In these cases, cycling has become an economic activity that helps women become independent in terms of earning a livelihood (Began & Thamrin, 2018).

In a separate study about Malaysia, another motivation and benefit for women cycling was found to be socializing. Women view cycling as a community, emphasizing the importance of building networks and communities for women. Through cycling groups and events, women can make friends and expand their businesses by connecting with new people. Self-discovery is also cited as a motivating factor and a benefit of cycling for women in Malaysia (Abdullah & Naimi, 2023). Having had the opportunity to speak with my 30-year-old sister-in-law from Malaysia and her friend from Jakarta, Indonesia, both affirmed that there are no significant restrictions or limitations for women in their countries similar to those in Iran. Ayu and Anisa shared that they regularly use bicycles in their daily lives and the dress code is relatively flexible, with the government not imposing strict regulations.

Both Malaysia and Indonesia adopt a more liberal interpretation of Islam compared to Iran, resulting in greater freedoms for women. In more conservative regions, cultural norms and expectations may discourage or limit women's mobility, including their ability to freely cycle in public spaces. However, in urban areas and more progressive communities, women's cycling is gaining acceptance and encouragement. While Malaysia and Indonesia generally offer more freedom and flexibility for women's mobility in bicycling, Iran's more conservative approach, based on strict interpretations of Islamic laws, results in more stringent regulations and limitations on women's ability to engage in cycling.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, the government's control over women's mobility related to bicycling is relatively limited. The legal framework in these countries does not specifically restrict women from cycling or impose strict regulations on their mobility in public spaces. These

countries have taken significant strides in promoting gender equality in sports, allowing women to engage in competitive athletic events, both nationally and internationally. Female athletes from Malaysia and Indonesia have achieved remarkable success and recognition, showcasing their talents and breaking barriers within cycling (Figure 5). In contrast, Iranian women athletes encounter more pervasive restrictions and limitations due to the stricter interpretation of Islamic principles in their country. Iranian female athletes face stringent dress codes, gender segregation, and societal pressures that hinder their participation and advancement in sports. This contrast in women's sports between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Iran serves as a compelling example of how the interpretation and practise of Islam can influence societal norms and opportunities for women. Overall, the more liberal interpretation of Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, coupled with their moderate approach, has led to greater freedom and mobility for women, particularly in sports like cycling. While Malaysia and Indonesia continue to make progress in promoting women's cycling, Iran faces more significant social debates and challenges surrounding women's participation in the sport.

Women from Girl Gang Cycling Club in Malaysia (Source: Instagram)

Conclusion

Through this research, it became evident that the constraints on women's cycling in Iran are not rooted in Islamic principles. Instead, governmental and religious authorities employ Islam as a means to rationalize their imposition of restrictions on women's public activities. There were no bicycles at the time Islam originated, but we have documents indicating that women rode camels during that period. Prompting the question: How could Islam prohibit an activity that did not even exist during its inception? If Islam had an issue with women riding, why was it not the case with riding animals? The absence of explicit rules or references in Islam and the Quran regarding women's cycling underscores that the barriers are predominantly cultural and legal, developed over time by governments to limit women's public presence and control them. If religious limitations on women's cycling were inherent to Islam, one would expect to observe them uniformly across all Islamic nations, notably in countries with the largest Muslim populations, such as Indonesia. This raises further questions about the intersection of cultural norms, state policies, and religious interpretations in shaping women's mobility in Muslim-majority societies.

Overall, it is important to note that against all the challenges mentioned in this paper regarding women’s cycling in Iran, Iranian women persistently push boundaries and strive to

reclaim their rights. Despite the risks involved, women across various age groups can be seen cycling in different parts of Iran's cities today. This act is not without its difficulties; these women knowingly place themselves in potentially precarious situations, facing the possibility of being caught and detained. Nevertheless, their determination to fight for their rights is evident.

Since the unfortunate death of Mahas Amini last year and subsequent events, women in Iran have displayed remarkable resilience in various forms of protest against the current government. Beyond removing their hijabs in public places, cycling also has turned into a significant form of civil opposition and struggle. Women today are more aware of their rights and exhibit greater courage than ever before. Their collective aspiration is to claim the mobility they rightfully deserve, demonstrating a profound commitment to paving the way for a more liberated and equal future.

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Chapter 7: Pedalling Through Conflict: Syrian Women Breaking Barriers in a War Zone

Yaewon Cho (Claire)

Cycling, with its simple yet revolutionary potential, offered women a new sense of freedom that was hard to find in other forms of transportation. For many, the bicycle was not just a way to get from one place to another; it was a ticket to autonomy, a means to break free from the constraints of family and societal expectations. Unlike horses or cars, bicycles were affordable and accessible to a wider audience, making them a game-changer for women's mobility.

Of course, this newfound freedom wasn't immediately welcomed. In North America and Europe, the idea of women cycling faced resistance at the turn of the century. But over time, as women challenged and countered these arguments, cycling became an accepted activity and mode of transportation and leisure for both men and women in many societies. Along its long and eventful journey to acceptance, the bicycle also spurred other changes, such as shifts in women's fashion, with women shedding cumbersome clothing that hindered their mobility in favour of more practical attire.

Even today, despite years of women cycling freely in the West and in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, resistance persists in many societies across the Middle East. Conservative forces and some religious leaders continue to issue judgments deeming women's cycling either unacceptable or not advisable, creating significant barriers for female cyclists as it is discussed in by Basmechi, Ebnenasir, and Hoodfar in this volume. However, not all religious leaders share this view. Some clerics have drawn parallels to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), noting that women rode camels without restriction, and thus see no issue with women riding bicycles.

These discussions have, in some cases, encouraged more conservative clerics to soften their stance. For instance, some Saudi religious authorities have permitted women to cycle for recreational purposes, provided they remain fully covered and are accompanied by a male guardian.[25] This shift suggests that women's persistence in asserting their right to cycle has compelled religious leaders to reluctantly acknowledge that Islam does not inherently forbid women from cycling. This growing recognition represents a significant step toward dismantling cultural and religious barriers that have long limited women's freedom. Figure below showcases a pivotal moment: the starting line of Saudi Arabia's first women's cycling race, symbolizing cultural shifts in the region.

Moreover, women themselves have engaged in lively debates on the topic. To break the taboo, some women in the region have taken action by forming cycling teams, organizing group rides, and even holding demonstrations to reclaim public spaces and normalize the sight of women on bikes.

[25] The Guardian. (2013, April 3). Saudi women allowed to cycle – with conditions. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/apr/03/saudi-women-allowed-to-cycle; Harrison, P. (2018). BBC UGC and Social News. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-43740203 (accessed 10 August 2024).

Ready, steady, go- Riders at the starting line of Saudi Arabia's first women cycling race (Source: BBC)

In this process, some states tacitly encouraged cycling for women, at least as a sport and leisure activity, as long as it didn't carry any political implications. Syria is one such state, and in this short chapter, I briefly present the story of women cycling in Syria—a country that has been gripped by civil war since 2011, which has also become a proxy war for other regional and international forces. The war continues to rage, and it's the Syrian people—millions of whom are displaced while others live in a state of insecurity—who are paying the price.

Riding for Rights: The Syrian Women's Bike Story

As the war drags on, people in Syria have turned to bicycles as a practical means of transportation. With cars often unavailable or too expensive, bikes have become an accessible alternative. But for women this choice hasn't been without risks. Women riding bicycles have faced harassment, reflecting deep-seated cultural taboos. Instead of retreating, however, they've organised, banding together to ride through the streets in groups. These demonstrations have directly challenged these taboos, making cycling a more accepted part of urban life, regardless of gender. In doing so, they're not just fighting for their right to ride—they're fighting for their place in society, a struggle that began decades earlier.

Syrian women were among the first in the Arab world to embrace cycling, but they faced significant resistance due to entrenched cultural norms. Abdul Fattah Beitmani, former Head of the Syrian Cycling Union, highlighted how Syrian cyclist Katherine Barsah won a major tournament at the 7th Arab session in 1992, showcasing the early contributions of Syrian women in the sport. Despite this, oppressive beliefs persisted. A widespread myth claimed that cycling could "deflower" women which is a colloquial term for breaking of the hymen and losing one's virginity, echoing similar false fears in the West, where women were warned that cycling might harm their reproductive health. These misconceptions—or, as many would say, deliberate falsehoods in the context that hymen continues to reflect on honour of young women—hindered the adoption of bicycles as a common mode of transportation for women in many Middle Eastern countries, including Syria. In reality, however, these patriarchal societies feared losing control over women if they became independently mobile.

In 2004, a significant effort to challenge this status quo took place, tacitly supported by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs. Two hundred seventy women from several Arab countries and around the world cycled into Damascus, the Syrian capital, as part of a regional tour aimed at combating gender discrimination and inequality in the Arab world. This Middle Eastern women's bicycle ride began in Beirut, Lebanon, passed through Syria, and continued into Jordan before concluding in the Palestinian territories. The participants, organised by the international group **"Follow the Women,"** that organizes rallies for peace, cycled about 50 kilometres daily through some of the most conservative regions. Their journey was a powerful statement, promoting acceptance and encouraging women to express themselves and claim public space.

Given its success, the campaign was adopted and co-sponsored by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, and became an annual event, growing in participation each year. However, the civil war and insecurity eventually diminished its international appeal, and due to financial limitations, the government officially ended it in 2017, although it had already become a non-event by then due to the war and security concerns.

Women Cycling in Times of Conflict: "Yalla Let's Bike"

In 2013, as the Syrian war raged on, Sara Zein recognized a pressing need to challenge gender stigma in her community. With traffic becoming unbearable due to numerous security checkpoints, she made the bold decision to start riding a bicycle. However, her rides were met with relentless sexual harassment from bystanders. Undeterred, Sara founded "Yalla Let's Bike," an initiative aimed at breaking down gender stereotypes through the eco-friendly, accessible, and convenient activity of cycling. Under the slogan "Even under debris, we shall wake up and revolt," what began as a small group of female cyclists soon grew into a nationwide movement, with over 4,000 women and girls participating. "Yalla Let's Bike" not only promoted gender-inclusive cycling across war-torn cities but also trained female instructors to teach others how to ride. The initiative harnessed the power of social media, sharing photos on Facebook of men and women cycling side by side, sending a powerful message of empowerment and equality. By 2018, their Facebook page had already gained over 36,580 followers. She also organised rides that more than one thousand women participated in and managed to get the support of the UN for her efforts.

The United Nations, as part of its campaign for "Momentum for Change" and environmental awareness, showcases initiatives around the world that battle climate change. The campaign showcased "Yalla Let's Bike" and ran a special story on the UN Climate Change space about Syrian women's cycling. It also launched a video clip to show how women, despite the civil war and inhospitable cultural context, have brought major change to their lives, their communities, and contributed to improving the climate in their war-ridden city of Damascus.

The video clip starts with Zein discussing the aims of her initiative. According to Zein, "Yalla Let's Bike" was founded to promote bicycling "as an eco-friendly mode of transport that reduces reliance on fossil fuels" and to host cycling events. If, however, this had been the only aim of "Yalla Let's Bike," the initiative would have been nothing special, merely one of many introduced in the UN Climate Change campaign. However, the environmental focus has not been the sole target of this initiative. She reveals that the initiative was also designed to improve gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria. By its intrinsic nature, she says, her initiative has enabled people of different backgrounds and genders to engage with each other and has allowed women to ride bicycles independently, "making such sights more common, and therefore more acceptable."

The impact of "Yalla Let's Bike" has been remarkable, with bicycle sales in Damascus rising by 60% in recent years. By 2022 and 2023, women and girls accounted for 40% of the buyers, according to local bike shop owners. Working alongside the Damascus governor, the group successfully advocated for the creation of 6 miles of bike lanes and bike parks, marking the first bicycle-friendly infrastructure in the country. The initiative's environmental focus even earned it recognition from the UN's "Momentum for Change" initiative, which highlights solutions for a sustainable, low-carbon future. By promoting cycling for women and girls—something once considered unthinkable in Syria—"Yalla Let's Bike" has been a powerful force in the fight against gender discrimination, truly liberating women during a time of conflict.

“I Want a Bike”: The Continued Legacy Through Younger Generations

In 2020, a younger generation of female activists took up the mantle. Determined to keep the momentum going, they founded “I Want A Bike,” continuing the mission of empowering women through cycling in conflict zones. Led by 28-year-old journalist and cyclist Midia Ghanem, what started as a small group of friends quickly expanded to 15 women, and soon, more than 50 members joined. In 2021, “I Want a Bike” hosted Syria’s first women’s cycling race in collaboration with the Sports Federation, attracting over 30 participants.

I want a bike. The campaign to get Syrian Women cycling. (Source: We Love Cycling. Com)

The fact that women still have to take these actions to make cycling a routine part of every woman’s life highlights the ongoing discrepancies between genders and the discriminatory limitations women continue to face. Importantly, however, it shows that women are ready to take collective action to change these discriminatory practises.

Conclusion

The bicycle has been a powerful force in the history of women’s rights, offering a sense of liberation and independence during times when women were severely restricted by societal

norms. In Syria, the bicycle remains a symbol of women's freedom, continuously used in social movements to challenge and break down taboos. The Middle East Women's Bicycle Rides in the early 2000s, where female cyclists rode through some of the region's most conservative areas, including Syria, sent a bold and empowering message, combining the fight for women's rights with the promotion of climate-friendly activities. Fast forward to 2013, and Syrian women took this spirit further with the launch of "Yalla Let's Bike," an initiative that boldly addressed sexual discrimination and harassment in public spaces—a challenge made even more difficult by the ongoing civil conflict. By harnessing the power of social media and earning recognition from the United Nations, "Yalla Let's Bike" became a model for the next generation of activists. In 2020, young women carried this torch forward with "I Want a Bike," a campaign that continued the fight for gender equality and inclusiveness through cycling, culminating in Syria's first women's cycling race. Through these movements, Syrian women have used the bicycle not just as a means of transportation, but as a vehicle for asserting their newfound liberty and independence, standing up against prevailing oppressions, and boldly claiming their place in society.

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Chapter 8: Developing a Network of Muslim Women Riders Across Britain

Anniesa Hussain

Introduction

What connotations spring to mind when you envision riding a bicycle? Freedom, adventure, or a mode of transportation? Now picture a woman or girl on a bicycle and what do you see? For many in a western context today, such connotations remain unchanged. Rewind back 200 years and this wasn't the case. In her book *Wheels of Change,* Sue Macy details how opposition to women riding bicycles goes back to the 1800s in the United States, where those women who enjoyed using bicycles merely as a means to travel, were told they were riding the wheel straight to hell, at risk of being sexually promiscuous, or at the very least were considered unladylike.

During the 1890s, male and female commentators alike posited the notion that women riding bicycles - particularly those using them frequently - were at significant risk of jeopardizing their ability to have children (Macy 2017:24). This debate became highly pedantic, moving into a discourse on *how* women rode bicycles as opposed to simply highlighting *why* they shouldn't. This included honing in on posture and positions, shape of cycle seats and saddles, what was or wasn't appropriate attire when cycling, to even the optimum height a handlebar should be, to ensure that women weren't overstimulating - or damaging - their pelvic organs. These debates, though masquerading through a scientific lens, were in fact intended to control mobility rights for women.

The societal need to control and curb female independence underpinned the conversations about female cyclists throughout the 19th Century. The very idea of women having access to freedom, namely within the context of mobility in public spaces and to be able to ride alone and unaccompanied, distressed the socio-religious and conservative elite at the time. Many women cycling publicly were depicted and labelled as immoral. Additionally, many posters, newspaper articles and satirical cartoons depicted women cyclists as having romantic rendezvous in public. These included kissing men (whilst sitting on a bicycle) and revealing their bloomers whilst riding.

The Evolution of Women Cyclists in the United States

Yet by 1922, women in the United States were able to experience greater freedom and independence in public spaces, unchaperoned and unaccompanied, compared to the women that went before them. Women's rights movements in the 19th Century used the bicycle as a symbol of freedom and femininity, both directly championing those women defying opposition to them in a saddle and encouraging women to tap into the independence cycling could offer them. American civil rights leader, Susan B. Anthony, stated in 1896:

> "I think [the bicycle] has done more to emancipate women than any one thing in the world. I rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a bike. It gives her a feeling of self-reliance and independence the moment she takes her seat; and away she goes, the picture of untrammelled womanhood" (The Guardian 2011).

Cycling as a Symbol of Female Emancipation in the United Kingdom

Many women in the United Kingdom were also experiencing this emancipation via cycling from the late 19th Century onwards. The bicycle became a transcendent symbol of liberation for many women - irrespective of social status and class - granting them opportunities to gain independence and self-reliance outside the domestic sphere. By the late 1800s, women cycling had well and truly become a phenomenon, inspiring American-born British writer Lillias Campbell Davidson to believe the bicycle offered the "greatest boon that has come to women

for many a long day" (Women and the Machine 2001:98). Lillias set up the first women cycling organisation, The Lady Cyclists' Association, in 1892, which provided social events, tours and rides exclusively for women.

As was the case in the United States, women cyclists quickly faced backlash over their attire, as they opted for shorter skirts and all-in-one blouse bloomer undergarments when cycling (British Library 2020). Many women cyclists faced criticism for their choice of "immodest" clothing - deemed such as it looked contrary to traditional, "feminine" attire - when riding.

Nonetheless, women activists and cycling enthusiasts alike have braved the tide of political and socio-religious opposition to women cycling, across the UK, US and wider northern hemisphere. It's worth noting that the bicycle played a significant role as a tool for women's emancipation in numerous women's suffrage movements in the UK (and beyond). As a result of these efforts and countless women who refused to give up the belief that cycling was just as much their right as any man's, many people in the UK today don't perceive women cyclists as vulgar, masculine, or promiscuous.

Cycling in the British Ethnic Minority Context

In 2011, Transport for London (TfL) data reported that less than 7% of all cyclists in the UK hail from Black, Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups (Sporting Equals 2010). Moreover, TfL found that 2% of white women cycle in London compared to 1% of BAME women (Sporting Equals 2011).

In her thesis, *Cycling Amongst Muslim Women in London: Barriers and Policies*, Sobia Chaudhry finds a clear correlation between higher levels of coronary heart disease, diabetes and mental health issues amongst Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the UK and lower participation in outdoor physical activities, compared to the rest of the population.

The ratio of South Asian women participating in outdoor exercise is considerably lower than their male counterparts. For instance, Sobia points to a study conducted by Bowles Green Limited (2020), reporting that 5% of Pakistani men cycle in comparison to 0% of Bangladeshi women which are significantly lower cycling levels than the 16% for men and 8% for women of the whole UK population (Chaudhry 2020:7). Indoor exercising and female-only gyms or fitness classes tend to appeal more to women - specifically from a Muslim background - than cycling outdoors.

There is a growing recognition that BAME groups, particularly South Asians, are significantly underrepresented when it comes to cycling in the UK, in spite of the awareness of the many health benefits cycling offers. Yet there is very little research or literature on the setbacks, experiences, and challenges south Asian women especially face when cycling outdoors.

What Challenges do Women Cyclists Face in their Communities?

A fundamental setback to cycling amongst British South Asian women is a deep concern about what others may think or say to them riding in public. "*Log kya kehn gaye"*, or "*what will people say?"* is a common worry particularly amongst older generations of women, many of whom have either been taught to stay within the private sphere, or choose to not venture out publicly often, even if having the freedom to do so. This mentality contributes in part to a cultural taboo which prevents some Muslim women from cycling in full view of their community, so much so that it can override the importance outdoor exercise has on their physical and mental wellbeing.

East Londoner and member of Sister Cycles, Sabeha Miah, recounts her initial reluctance to ride a cycle in public:

> As a Bangladeshi woman being brought up in our community in the UK, there's a sense of tradition and young women are told to behave in a particular way... At one stage, my parents said it's not very ladylike to be on a bicycle. I never questioned this, until lockdown where I gave it a go and broke my own taboos. (My London 2021).

Another challenge for Muslim women cyclists lies in the perception that cycling attire tends to be immodest, which is contrary to the traditional loose clothing many South Asians typically wear. Opposition to perceived riding gear (tight fitting lycra and shorts for example) has proved a real setback to many Muslim women riding in public over the last decade.

Yet it's important to note there are non-cultural setbacks to Muslim women cyclists too. Many Londoners are faced with a lack of storage space at home, or struggle with feeling unsafe and vulnerable if cycling outdoors, against the fast-paced nature of London driving and rates of harassment on the roads. South Asian women face similar struggles. In fact, recent Transport for London (TfL) data reveals that 73% of Asian and other ethnic minority women living in London cited personal safety as a particular concern when cycling (Transport for London 2021).

COVID-19 and the Diversification of Cycling

As Sabeha's story illustrated, throughout the pandemic many Muslim women took up outdoor cycling. In 2021, an independent study commissioned by Transport for London (TfL) took a representative sample of 3,500 Londoners and discovered that for the first time in London's history, BAME groups were just as likely to have cycled from 2019 onwards, as their non-ethnic counterparts.

The study found that cycling not only increased in London since the start of the pandemic but attracted participants from minority ethnic communities. Moreover, 46% of surveyed British Asians stated they would be open to starting cycling (Transport for London 2021). Throughout the height of the pandemic, many South Asian and other women groups from predominantly Muslim backgrounds, either took up outdoor cycling for the first time, or cycled more frequently, building up their confidence riding publicly during the height of the pandemic, when the volume of traffic was significantly reduced, leading to less cars on the road and fewer spectators.

The pandemic may have provided more favourable conditions for first-time women cyclists or deepened enthusiasm for the sport for those women already cycling, but for many Muslim women, their cycling journeys preceded 2019. There are a number of Muslim women cycling groups across the UK who are working hard to break the taboo on cycling in public and combat common health issues primarily within the South Asian community through inclusive cycling initiatives.

Boosting Health and Confidence Levels through Outdoor Cycling

The rise of Muslim women cycling groups in the UK is important and necessary, especially given South Asians not only have the highest mortality rate from heart disease but are also six times more likely to develop diabetes than their white counterparts, around 400,000 British South Asians have diabetes (The King's Fund 2023). In addition to socio-economic conditions, lifestyle changes post-immigration - such as leading a more sedentary lifestyle, decreased levels of exercise and excess abdominal fat - all contribute significantly to cardiovascular heart disease (CVD) and diabetes levels in this community.

Moreover, these cycling groups provide many women from Muslim backgrounds with the opportunity to build their confidence, improve their mental health and to network with other women who hail from similar backgrounds and circumstances. In its recent report, Sustrans, a charity that advocates for the physical and mental benefits of walking and cycling, published a testimonial from Naaema, a local Tower Hamlet resident and cycling enthusiast:

> For me, cycling is a recent thing but I've done a lot in a short space of time. I've become a ride leader for Cycle Sisters, a cycling group set up to encourage Muslim women to cycle. I have my own special method of teaching and usually I get people cycling within 20 minutes. I had a 54-year-old lady learn how to ride in her first lesson. Breaking down barriers is important. I hear, "I'm too old, I'm not fit, I suffer depression, I can't ride in my abaya And I tell them none of these things should stop you. I say that I believe they can do it. I show them and with a little time and lots of encouragement, they start to ride and get so much out of it. Cycling has helped me recover from illness and bereavement. It's not just about learning how to cycle. It's about self-belief, resilience, achievement. And these women become role models themselves, pass on the skills and these other great qualities that come with riding a bike. People see me and say, "if she can do it, I can too. (Sustrans 2022).

Tower Hamlets is an area in London that has a Muslim population of over 39% (Census 2021). Naaema is just one case example of a South Asian woman who, through cycling, was able to overcome personal barriers and struggles, and not only meet other women but pass on the baton of confidence and cycling skills to other women in her local community.

Despite being born and raised in the UK, or at least living in Britain for decades, there are still many in the South Asian community who don't believe in outdoor exercise for women. The perception of women cyclists of the more conservative factions of the community is alarming, as they tend to believe that women need to display modesty at all times, both in dress and conduct. However, the increase in Muslim women led cycling groups has the potential to slowly chip away at some of this rhetoric and ideology. Cycling groups such as Cycle Sisters, were set up to inject social change not just into the lives of its members but their communities as a whole and to positively convey the need to rethink gender norms within Muslim-oriented communities. These cycling groups encourage women to come and cycle as they are - whether in an abaya or in the loose, flowy clothes many women tend to wear on a daily basis - which plays a huge role in reinforcing the fact that cycling outdoors can be a comfortable and culturally acceptable experience, whilst also building intra-community relations and solidarity with their sisters.

Some examples of these cycling groups include the likes of Evolve, Cycle Sisters, Cycle FIT (Jagonari Centre) and Bristol's Cycling Sisters, which were all set up to encourage and equip primarily women from Muslim backgrounds to cycle outdoors. In affiliation with British Cycling, Evolve - the award-winning cycling network for Muslim women, holds frequent cycling sessions to not only help women from the community to learn to cycle but to build their confidence and connections amongst other Muslim women through group rides. Iffat Tejani, of South Asian descent and co-founder of Evolve, is on a personal mission to diversify cycling and make it more inclusive within Muslim communities. In an interview with The Muslim News, Iffat recognised the growing positive impact Muslim women-led cycling is having on minority communities:

> Quite often, we don't think we [Muslim women] are good enough to cycle. It is changing, very quickly, with the formation of Evolve, Cycle Sisters, Joy Riders and Women of Colour Cycling. We are increasing the number of female cyclists from ethnic minority communities. The governing body of British Cycling has also formed a diversity and inclusion advisory group to address and increase the number of female cyclists and cyclists from ethnic minority communities, (The Muslim News 2021).

Similarly, the Jagonari Cycling Project, launched in 2005, successfully engaged with women from primarily Bangladeshi backgrounds in training up Muslim women to cycle publicly across Tower Hamlets in London. This initiative prides itself on its commitment to "breaking cultural barriers, changing local attitudes towards women and cycling" (East London Cyclist 2008), in addition to furthering women's empowerment in the context of mobility rights and improved health. Another example of a Muslim women-led riding initiative is the Bristol's Cycling

Sisters, who after discovering the appetite for cycling amongst women in their local community, created a "buddy" network whereby women of similar circumstances could engage with each other during cycling sessions. Bristol's Cycling Sisters offer free training and a network of support as they work towards their goals of both normalising cycling for Muslim women and creating a fun environment for women to explore and develop these mobility skills in public.

Case Study: Cycle Sisters

In investigating the different Muslim women-led cycling groups, I reached out to Cycle Sisters London with the intent to personally experience a cycle session for myself and hear from some of the group's members about their own cycling journeys.

The Cycle Sisters movement was founded by Sarah Javaid in 2016. Sarah is both a National Standards Cycling Instructor and British Cycling Tutor. Recognising the inequalities in cycling and barriers for Muslim women which prevented them from cycling, she, alongside a small group of friends, set out to create a riding experience that both understood and met the needs of Muslim women.

Cycle Sisters first started out in Waltham Forest, North East London, offering supportive, inclusive and sociable riding experiences to primarily - but not exclusively - local Muslim women, many of whom are of a South Asian heritage. Today, Cycle Sisters is an award-winning organisation which aims to inspire and encourage Muslim women cycling in the UK, through providing practical support, training, partnerships, and role models to assist Muslim women in their cycling journeys. Cycle Sisters work to tackle stereotypes attached to women cyclists and help to create a diverse and inclusive environment for their participants. They host weekly riding sessions, ranging from beginner to advanced levels, across nine boroughs in London.

Personal Reflections of Riding as a Cycle Sister in Tower Hamlets

In December, I had the privilege of joining a riding session with the Cycle Sisters group (Tower Hamlets division). The Tower Hamlets division offers weekly rides on Thursdays and Sundays, providing a limited number of bicycles for any participants without a bicycle of their own.

I had opted for a Sunday ride at intermediate level, and having pre-booked a cycle from the group a few days earlier, headed down to the designated meeting point in Tower Hamlets. Upon my arrival, a few Ride Leaders were already in action, examining the pre-booked cycles, testing the air pressure of the tyres, and checking the condition of cycle brakes and chains.

After each participant arrived (11 of us in total), Ride Leaders organised an "ABC" check, which consisted of each Sister checking her own cycle for adequate air pressure in their tyres, testing their brakes and ensuring the cycle chain was in good condition. The Leaders then arranged for each participant to perform emergency stops and ride around in a safe car park, to confirm cyclists' alertness, instincts, and confidence levels when riding.

We set off *en route* to the Tower of London from Tower Hamlets, alternating between riding in pairs or in single file along the canal, park paths and cycle lanes on the main roads. The formation was very well organised by the Ride Leaders, particularly in the cycle lanes on the main roads. Leaders were stationed at the front, middle and back of the group, with the Leader at the back intermittently riding out to the side of the group to alert cyclists to change formation depending on available space for incoming cyclists.

One key role of the Leader at the back was to keep an eye on when the Cycle Sisters formation would break, primarily on account of red traffic lights. If part of the group was held back by red traffic lights, the front end of the cycle party would carry on, until the Leader signalled them to stop and wait for the rest of the group by blowing a warning signal via a whistle. The front

Ride Leader would then stop, along with some of the riders behind her, until the rest of the group were able to catch up and resume the formation.

After reaching Tower Millenium Pier, next to the Tower of London, the group parked up their cycles at a local cafe and sat down for a tea/coffee break. Here, I grabbed some conversations with some of the Sisters to talk about their cycling journeys, what attracted them to the Cycle Sisters, and any opposition they faced or observed as Muslim women cycling in public.

Every Sister I talked to had a different cycling story. One participant joined the Cycle Sisters as a break from taking care of her disabled daughter and finds riding with the group really enjoyable. Another spotted the Cycle Sisters riding around Tower Hamlets and wanted to join after feeling inspired from seeing Muslim women cycling out in the community. Another joins the weekly riding sessions as an enjoyable way to get out of the house and exercise in the fresh air.

Breaking off for a well deserve coffee/tea break and a natter (Source: Author)

Most of the Sisters I talked to didn't face opposition to cycling - one talked about how her husband supported her joining the Cycle Sisters, and even wanted to start family rides with her and their children. Another Sister's husband watched over her disabled daughter while she took time out with the Cycle Sister. One Sister talked of her struggle to convince other women in her family to take up cycling or any form of outdoor exercise, stating they were too concerned about what other members of the community may think. She stated that many women within her Bangladeshi community still prefer to stay at home and not venture out often in public.

The group headed back to Tower Hamlets from Tower Bridge, following the same formation, rules, and structure. On the way back, we passed another group of hijab-clad cyclists who recognised the Cycle Sisters and expressed solidarity in seeing other Muslim women riding out on the road. In passing, the woman who had called out her support for our cycling group stated she belonged to the Redbridge Cycle Sisters division!

In total, the cycle route from Tower Hamlets to Tower Bridge (including the coffee/tea break) took just over 3 hours. Joining the Cycle Sisters during this cycling trip granted me an insight into the sisterhood the group has established within their local community. It's a group

that offers friendship and the opportunity to build confidence in its members - for instance every Ride Leader I spoke to started out as participants before being offered the opportunity to train as leaders and then train up other members.

Posing for a tower of London selfie! Final stop before heading back to Town Hamlets. (Source: Author)

I witnessed the camaraderie between regular members and also how the group embraced new members to their group (aside from me, there were two joiners), quickly assimilating us into the community they were building through cycling.

Stella Creasy, MP for Walthamstow, stated:

Cycle Sisters has made a visible difference - there are noticeably more Muslim women on bikes which challenges stereotypes and therefore has a wider impact." (Cycle Sisters n.d.).

Having experienced a full cycling route as a Cycle Sister, I must say, I definitely agree. Initiatives that are led by Muslim women, for Muslim women, are most likely to communicate the social and health benefits of cycling to other women in their communities.

Today, in London, more and more Muslim women feel empowered to hop onto a bicycle in public and without feeling the need to divert from their traditional clothing, in full view of their community. Women-led initiatives such as the Cycle Sisters serve to encourage and spread awareness that more Muslim women can also take up cycling without compromising their beliefs and attire, which is a powerful tool in closing the gap in cycling inequalities for women from Muslim backgrounds.

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Chapter 9: On What I Love – My Father and Cycling

Itrath Syed

There is a picture that everyone in my family loves. It was taken in the mid-1970s, shortly after my family emigrated from Pakistan to Canada. It is a sunny Vancouver day and my older brother, sister, and I are all standing over our new bikes. My siblings are much older than me and they have shiny new green bicycles and bell bottom pants. I am younger with thick bangs and chubby arms and standing over my red and white tricycle. My parents, newly arrived immigrants, thought it was important that we have our own bikes. They were so proud to have given us each this symbol of having arrived and settled in our new chosen home.

A few years later, my father would get me my own bicycle. It came with training wheels, and I was very hesitant to have them removed. I have these clear memories of my father taking them off and then running up and down the street behind me as I learned to ride. I was so scared, and I kept telling him to not let go. He would run behind with one arm on the back of my seat, steadying me. Grounding me. That is what my father always did for me.

Eventually he convinced me that I could do this on my own. But as soon as he let go of the bike it would wobble, and I would jump off. An early advocate of control, I thought it was better to choose to dismount rather than fall.

And then one day I was riding and not falling. I remember getting to the end of the block for the first time and then turning around and seeing my father further back smiling at me.

My love of cycling has always been connected to my father, who was the love of my life. My father had always cycled. He was born in Hyderabad Deccan in pre-partition and British occupied India. That was the customary form of transport until one grew up and it shifted to motorcycles and vespas. I remember him telling me that everyone had bikes. I can't now remember if he had said that all *boys* had bikes or not. It must not have been a gendered practise because one of his sisters was also a cyclist, as were some of my female cousins in India and later in Pakistan.

I lived in Pakistan for a few years in the 80s. There was martial law, and General Zia was in power. I don't remember ever seeing a woman on a bike or a motorcycle during those years. I was told often that things were not safe and none of the young women I knew in my extended family or my friends at school ever went anywhere alone. There was no cycling for me during those years, or even walking alone. Safety for young girls in Karachi in the 80s meant travelling with older women, not necessarily men. My cousins and I often went to the markets with our mothers without any trouble.

When I was back in Canada and in high school, I would go bike riding for hours. It was the late 80s and we lived in Burnaby. The city had built a bike path that ran the length of the newly constructed SkyTrain. I would take my bike and follow the path and go to the woodlands and the lakes of Central Park. I had a blue 10-speed bike. We lived in an apartment building, and I would carry the bike up 3 flights of stairs and keep it on our balcony. Those years were emotionally messy and tumultuous, but cycling was my escape. I felt free and strong and the act of cycling and covering ground on my own gave me a promise that I would get through that time and find a life of my own.

I learned to drive later than most of my friends. I was in the last year of university and my father, retired by then, would go with me to campus every day. I would drive there on my learner's licence and then he would drive the car back. When I got my licence and was able to drive on my own, my father gave me his car and bought another. It was an old brown Datsun 210 that was

very unreliable. It replaced my bike and, as none of my friends were part of the emerging militant Vancouver cycling scene, I drifted away from cycling.

Years later I would periodically talk about buying a new bike and start cycling again. My father always insisted that I must do this and would remind me about it often. I am not sure why this was so important to him. At the time, I just thought it was one of my father's many opinions. (My father never tired of having opinions about every single thing!) But perhaps it was because he knew that cycling brought me a distinct form of joy that I needed in my life.

My father was ill for much of the last decade of his life. Taking care of him and accompanying him to medical appointments became the biggest part of my life. I lived alone about 10 minutes away from him and my mother. I spent those years in a constant state of being alert. I was always waiting for the call that something was wrong and that I needed to get there immediately. My father had various conditions, including several cardiac issues. Sometimes his arrythmia and blood pressure would go off and I would rush over to him. Often, as soon as I sat next to him, his heart rate and BP would stabilize.

The last year before my father Returned to God, he was in and out of hospital. I spent all my time with him in the hospital or preparing to go back to the hospital. During that year, the pandemic began and only one of us was able to be with him. I was usually that person because I had been his medical advocate for so many years. I am so grateful for that time with him and for being able to take care of him and walk to the end of his journey with him, just as he had walked with me to help me begin my journey.

My father passed a few months into the pandemic. By then people were spending all their time at home and cycling had become a new global pandemic obsession along with sourdough bread and bad Netflix series. There was a shortage of bikes in the city, but I was determined to find one. After too much research and with the help of an avid cyclist friend, I chose a shiny bright blue bicycle. The day I picked up my new assembled bike from the store I took it with me to the cemetery. I think I felt that it would have made my father happy to see me with my new best friend.

Getting back on a bike again and becoming familiar with the feelings associated with cycling has been a crucial part of my healing. With my father gone, my familial responsibilities lessened and when my mother moved away, they disappeared. I suddenly had the time and the freedom for long bike rides. All the years when my father was ill, I did not even go for walks. I never wanted to be far from my car lest I need to mobilize immediately to get to him. Now, I could plot and plan long bike rides and set off for hours. The only thing limiting me were the endless inclines in this beautiful city. Scouring maps, I learned the topography of this land and the ways to get from one end to the other whilst minimizing the need to cycle uphill. This is a serious skill.

My bicycle has a name, and I have an anthropomorphic relationship with her. She is Neelum, which means blue/sapphire in Urdu, and being with her makes me so happy. When I pull her out of the bike room and onto the bike path in front of my building, all the world begins to calm. The first few metres of riding are like a shot of pure joy. If it has been a while between trips, I am overwhelmed with a feeling of, "yes, I remember this".

As I immersed myself into cycling again, I searched online to try and connect with other Muslim women who were cyclists. At first, I was looking for tips on what kinds of headscarves to wear under a cycling helmet or what sports hijabs were the best, but what I found was a community. I was not the only Muslim woman who loved cycling, or who *needed* to cycle to feel connected to life again. There is a legion of us in every corner of the world. I found groups of Muslim women who work to bring the joy of cycling to other women in their communities. I started to hunt for Twitter accounts of Muslim women cyclists who posted pics of their rides. I recognized that look, of a slightly crazed joy, in their smiling selfies. I feel that way too.

Cycling makes me feel like it is good to be alive; that it is good to be here in this life. When my father died, I was overwhelmed not just with a sense of missing my father, but with the feeling that my father was missing me. I used to see my father nearly every day. On the days when I did not see him, we would talk several times. If I did not call him by 11 am, my father would call me and say, "I see that you have forgotten me". My mother would say that my father's eyes were always on the door waiting for my arrival. In the first few weeks and months, I kept thinking that he was waiting for me to join him in the next life.

Cycling was a deeply physical thing that I could do that helped bring me back to this life. The ache of my muscles, the sun in my eyes, the body of water next to the bike path, the smell of the air, even the danger of traffic when I ventured onto the roads, all of this brought me back viscerally to this world. It brought me back to feeling joy, feeling strong, and feeling free. This is what I love about cycling. This is what I would wish for every Muslim woman who wants this.

I recognize that cycling is something that has always been in my life without any fear or restriction and that is not true for many other Muslim women. It has never been a compromise of my faith or religious practise. It never occurred to me that it should be. It was also never that way for my father who was a deeply religious man. But, unlike my father, men who fear women's power and independence will always try to restrict our mobility. And cycling not only gives women real mobility it is a symbol of it.

It has been over 3 years since my father left this world and I am still in grief. I have long past the socially acceptable time of mourning and yet I still find myself in tears in the midst of a random memory. My father and I were so close. His love for me and his trust in me has shaped my whole understanding of the world. Both my parents taught me my religion. But my religious and political understanding was built through a life of talking with my father.

My father used to joke that I was a feminist at age 6. I don't doubt this. If I was, it was because my father raised me to be, even if he did not know it. We talked through and argued about so many issues throughout my life. But what I remember the most of my father is that he loved Allah and for him that meant loving justice and loving joy. That is what he gave me. My understanding of social justice comes from watching news with my father as a young child and from him telling me when something in the world was unjust and unfair. I took that instinctive understanding, developed it further, and then brought those insights back to our conversations. We learned from each other.

My understanding of joy came from my father's love of music and poetry. This was a love he held right until the end of his life. When he was in hospital, he would think of one random lyric from a song or a *ghazl* from his youth and then I would try to find it on YouTube to play for him on my phone, which I would place on his pillow, next to his good ear.

My father also understood my need to be independent. He built that in me. I remember when I was in Grade 1, he taught me how to walk from my elementary school to my babysitter's house each afternoon. When I was older, he taught me how to always tell cardinal directions in this city. "The mountains are north. Always look for the mountains to figure out where you are," he would say. My father was irritated by people who did not have a good sense of direction. I inherited this and am known to get annoyed at women friends, especially if they are young, who don't know where they are in the city or how they will get home. He understood my need for solitude and my need for building a life on my own terms. He encouraged me to trust myself and his trust in me taught me that I could. He set me up with all the skills I needed for the single life I have; one that neither of us had anticipated would be mine.

I think about these things when I am cycling. I think of how the freedom to cycle on one's own is a right that should never be denied to any woman in the name of Islam, by her family,

community, or state. I think about how my father's beautiful understanding of Islam opened the world up for me instead of closing it down.

As I am still learning to navigate this world without my father's comforting presence, I think of my father and how much he wanted me to do everything and be everything as long as it meant never leaving his side. He wanted me to finish my PhD, to travel, to teach, to write, to give talks, to get married. But, only as long as I could always be close to him. He never quite understood the contradiction between these things. When I was sitting next to his hospital bed, he would tell me to bring my laptop and just write my dissertation there. I never had the heart to tell him that that was not how writing worked.

I can do so much of what he wanted for me now. And while I am now able to travel and to cycle and to write and find joy in things that I had to let go of for years, it does not change the feeling of loss. When I am doing something that I have been scared to do, like exploring an unfamiliar cycling route, I do so with the feeling that my father raised me to do this, to be this. And because I am a believer, I remain certain of my Return as well. I pray to be reunited with my father in the next life and to be able to cycle through "gardens beneath which rivers flow" with my father. Inshallah.

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Back book cover

Before the digital revolution, bicycles were arguably the most transformative technology for ordinary women—and men. While men's right to ride was unquestioned, women had to fight for it. This struggle took a century in some societies and continues in others, notably many Muslim-majority states, some two hundred years later. Initially, bicycles faced no opposition in 19th-century Muslim contexts, but later, conservative forces—citing religion, modesty, and safety—framed them as symbols of inappropriate independence and a threat to men and women's morality. Yet these debates provided women with a political space to launch collective or individual initiatives reclaiming their right to cycle safely in public spaces. After all, through centuries of struggle, women have learned that visibility is the first and most fundamental step toward full and equal citizenship. The chapters in this volume attest to this ongoing struggle.

WLUML
Women Living Under Muslim Laws
Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes
Transnational Feminist Solidarity Network

شـــرکت گاہ
Shirkat Gah
Women's Resource Centre