

# “We Were Striving For Our Revolution” – Navigating Harms in the Pursuit of Change

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## Abstract

The death of Zhina-Mahsa Amini on September 16, 2022 ignited widespread protests against the oppression in various parts of Iran. The response from the Islamic Republic (IR) to these protests has been characterised by extreme violence since their inception in September 2022. This raises the question of how and why individuals continue to protest and resist such oppression despite facing them persistently. To explore this question, we conducted qualitative interviews with individuals who participated in the protests of 2022–2023. The research focused on the protesters’ perceptions and their strategies for coping with the oppression they faced. We used the evolving HARM-concept to investigate the profound consequences of suffering on the protesters’ ability to act. The evaluation of the interviews revealed that *community-feeling* played a crucial role in their decision to resist. The interviewees reported various forms of everyday resistance and how they dealt with the ongoing oppression. It turned out that *community-feeling* could influence perceptions of HARM and expand the possibilities of dealing with injury. Additionally, factors such as mental endurance and vulnerability appeared to change individuals’ perceptions and handling of injury.

## Keywords

“Woman, Life, Freedom”-protests in Iran; community-feeling; resistance; vulnerability; state violence

The experience of the street suspends thought about death, and this is what creates fear for observers: Seeing people who are ready to die. We are ready to die. No, we are not even ready. We have been liberated from thinking about death. We have left death behind us, in the intimacy of encountering our fears and running ahead of them in the warmth of the body. (L, 2022)

## Introduction

On September 16, 2022, three days after her arrest by the Iranian government’s Guidance Patrol and her subsequent transfer to a Tehran hospital, 22-year-old Zhina-Mahsa Amini died. She succumbed to the consequences of physical abuse inflicted on her during and after her arrest, to which the officials justified on the grounds of alleged non-compliance with Islamic regulations regarding the wearing of her hijab and legwear. The day of Aminis death marked the beginning of the nationwide protests, starting in Tehran in front of the hospital in which Amini was, as well as in Saqqez, her hometown. One day after her death, Zhina-Mahsa Amini was buried in the Aichi cemetery in the Kurdish city of

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Saqquez (Dara, 2022). Following the burial, thousands of people in Saqqez protested using the slogan *Zhin, Zhîyan, Azadî*.

To amplify their protest, many women took off their hijabs. Ignited by this incident, the scale and intensity of the protests increased significantly. Individuals from various social groups came together nationwide to protest against the killing of Zhina-Mahsa Amini. In addition to the general pursuit of greater freedom and resistance against oppression, the protests were also motivated by dissatisfaction with the economic situation (Iran Wire, 2023a). The Islamic Republic (IR)<sup>2</sup> reacted to the protests with severe oppression. According to Amnesty International, tens of thousands of people have been arrested (2023b), and since the protests began, the IR has been responsible for the deaths of several hundred individuals who had participated in street demonstrations (Amnesty International, 2023a, p. 197). The high number of people who have been killed in the context of the protests illustrates the severity of oppression by the IR. According to various media reports, protesters are being shot at (with live ammunition), beaten up, taken into custody, tortured, physically and psychologically abused, and terrorised (Amnesty International, 2022a; Iran Wire, 2023a). Iran Human Rights organisation reported more than 700 people were officially executed in Iran in the period from January 2023 to November 2023, with eight individuals receiving death sentences for their involvement in the protests (Iran Human Rights [IHRNGO], 2023). Despite the massive use of violence by the state, it had not succeeded in completely quelling the protests by the end of 2023.

In view of the will of large sections of the Iranian population to resist, our central research question focuses on the sources of the protesters' motivation to persevere. What factors helped them not to be completely intimidated by state violence and the threat of harm? To answer these and other related questions, we conducted interviews with Iranians who participated in the protests from 2022 to 2023<sup>3</sup>.

Central aspects of threats, deterrence and harassment cannot be adequately explained if they are simply subsumed under a general and vague concept of violence. Rather, they must be considered and understood in the contexts in which they unfold and are perceived and processed differently by different individuals. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of individual motivations for participating in protests, it is imperative to consider the contextual backdrop of people's experiences (Dhar, 2023, p. 46). The ways individuals navigate instances of violence and injury, and the meaning they attribute to these occurrences, appears pivotal in addressing the research question.

The evolving HARM-concept seems useful for this research endeavour, as it significantly expands the range of violence-related aspects to be included compared to the (classical) concept of violence. External influences on people that cannot be clearly categorised as violence can thus be recorded and examined in terms of their effects. Chakkarath and Gudehus state: "Harm causes varying degrees of suffering" (2023, p. 1). This concept recognises that the experience of suffering and how individuals deal with it also depend on the various meanings individuals give to suffering.

All interviewees reported various distressing experiences directly related to their respective roles in the protests of 2022–2023. They described — in some cases in great detail — how representatives of the IR had harmed them during the course of their participation in the protests. The emphasis on *experiences of suffering* and the *community-feeling* in the interviews prompts an inquiry into the interrelationship between these two phenomena. To what extent do they influence each other, and the actors involved in the protests? Furthermore, to what extent can the formation and/or reinforcement of community be understood as a coping mechanism against the impact of HARM?

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<sup>1</sup> In English: Woman, Life, Freedom/Liberty

<sup>2</sup> This paper will use the term *Islamic Republic* to describe the repressive government ruling Iran, abbreviated as IR. This designation distinguishes itself from the neutral *Islamic Republic of Iran* (IRI), an official term.

<sup>3</sup> Like most social science research, our study relies heavily on self-reporting by respondents as well as observations and assessments during the interviews. We are aware that various biases can creep in. For example, social science research can also be susceptible to political bias, particularly in the case of emotionally charged topics that overlap with current political issues and public debates. However, it is important for us to emphasise that we personally have no doubts about the fundamental information provided by the individuals we interviewed. This confidence stems from several factors, including the cross-referencing of our data within our sample, with statements from other affected witnesses, international journalistic reports, and findings from international human rights organisations. Most importantly, it is based on our personal experiences with the interviewees and the assessments that we as researchers reached during our joint interpretation sessions.

### Research Participants

Interviews (some oral and others, written) were conducted between May and July 2023. The sole and most important criterion for being included in this research project was the participation in the 2022–2023 protests in Iran. Interviews which were not conducted in English have been translated into the English language.<sup>4</sup>

Sepideh took part in the protests from September to November 2022 and was living in Germany at the time of the interview. Before her emigration, she was actively involved in university protests in a major city in Iran. During the interview, she described various protest actions at the university, shared her experiences, and also discussed the situation in Iran before the protests. Additionally, she focussed on her concerns about a close friend's safety.

Azad, who sought refuge in Germany due to threatening experiences she had faced with her child, was involved in the protests in her hometown in Iran since their inception. She underwent interrogation, an experience she elaborated on during the interview. Furthermore, she provided insights into the street protests and shed light on the IR's efforts to quell the ongoing protests forcefully.

Sora took part in the protests in a metropolitan region and was in Iran at the time of the interview. In the interview, she focused on describing certain days of protest, which she remembers both positively and negatively. Sora highlighted that there was a community that formed during the protests.

Shuresh played an active role in the protests in the Kurdish areas, having participated in many protests before. He addressed not only his experiences during the street protests but also the perception of violence by the IR in the Kurdish regions and the effects of the violence he experienced.

### Facets of HARM

With regards to our orientation along the HARM concept of Chakkarath & Gudehus (2023), the statements of the interviewees on the subject of harm actually point to a great variety of interlinked characteristics and experiences of violence. It is therefore not a question of assigning the reported phenomena to firmly defined categories; rather, the aim of this section is to identify possible forms and manifestations of suffering and injury on the basis of our empirical material. The interviewees vividly described how life underwent a sudden transformation at the onset of the protests, turning ordinary occurrences into extraordinary ones and vice versa. It became evident that people had experienced various forms of injuries on multiple levels, with these injuries often extending beyond the immediate moment of infliction and, therefore, holding long-term effects. Furthermore, violations can originate from specific actors, such as security forces of the IR, but also from more diffuse sources, such as institutionalised regulations or collectively shared narratives. In the following, we will list selected manifestations of HARM to give a first overview of the interviewee's experiences and the spectrum of injuries.

The most visible forms of HARM occurred during the street protests, as they are evident through the presence of armoured vehicles, heavy weaponry, and soldiers. In most parts of the country, the military increased its presence and visibility. This has been particularly noticeable in the Kurdish regions, which have been heavily militarised. All four interviewees talk about the security guards' use of live ammunitions and rubber bullets, batons, and teargas. Sepideh described their use of deadly force at universities and pointed out that these are not isolated incidents. Underlining the brutality inherent in these actions, she used the term "butchered" (Interview with Sepideh, April 27, 2023, para. 44). Sepideh highlighted how some protesters were made to feel humiliated by the security guards who smiled at them while directly aiming and sometimes even shooting at their faces or eyes (Interview with Sepideh, April 27, 2023, para. 66). Accordingly, Sora addressed the intimidating effect of hearing the motorcycles of the security guards. She described that the mere auditory perception of these engines is sufficient to induce fear and consequent injury (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 11). This is an indication of the internalisation of induced fear.

Injuries through various forms of isolation are less publicly recognised. Azad was separated from her family and peers during interrogation. Her insulation from the outside world was heightened through blindfolding, which also contributed to her feelings of loss of control since her capacity for sensory orientation was limited (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para.

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<sup>4</sup> Sepideh was interviewed in English. The interviews with Azad, Sora, and Shuresh were conducted in Farsi with the help of an interpreter, who then translated the interviews into English.

60). In the interview with Shuresh, social rejection and exclusion were mentioned as forms of isolation. Due to the fear of repercussions, close associates had distanced themselves from Shuresh and denied him a new job (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 82).

Another field of harmful experiences is related to torture, directly and indirectly. Lack of knowledge about the condition of loved ones who have been imprisoned, for example, can cause suffering, as reported by Shuresh (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, paras. 38 and 45). He did not know about what happened to incarcerated relatives during their imprisonment; this leads to speculation about the treatment of detainees. What triggers the injury here is, therefore, not only the knowledge of the suffering of others but also the anticipation and imagination of possible potential suffering without having any certainty about the person's actual condition.

Azad's case portrays the impact of her experience of torture during her interrogation. Throughout the interview, Azad emphasised multiple times that she was repeatedly touched in intimate areas by one, and sometimes several, male security guards at the same time under the pretext of an examination. Furthermore, she was insulted during her detention, as interrogators threatened Azad and her child with sexual violence and physical harm (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 59): "We will take a signed letter of commitment from you. If you break this commitment, it will have very dangerous consequences for you, which means it might cost your child's life" (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 65).

The physical harming of individuals, including those not directly involved in the protests, serves as a method to instil fear in people. This intimidation is perceived differently by the demonstrators, resulting in varying actions. For example, Sora describes how the group of protesters was increasingly demoralised by the killing and execution of protesters: "Just to destroy that happiness, joy, enthusiasm, and sense of togetherness and social fervour from the 16th Azar... they executed Mohsen" (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 27).

The use of extreme violence and the experience of injuries could not suppress the protests for long. Therefore, the question arises as to why people continued to take part in the protests despite the injuries and ongoing oppression.

### **Emergence of a *Community-Feeling***

In this paper, we want to contextualise injury and suffering within a social and cultural framework. This pertains to configurations in the immediate social sphere, such as family, as well as on a broader societal level. To understand the interdependence between the individual and the collective dimension, it is insightful to take a very brief look at some of Jerome Bruner's core assumptions. According to Bruner, people try to make sense of their experiences and attribute meaning to them with the help of culturally shaped narratives. This meaning-making is constituent not only in everyday life but also in critical situations of ruptures or crises and has a psychological effect on the (emotional) experience, perception, and (future) behaviour of individuals (Bruner, 1990; see also Mattingly et al., 2008). For example, persons who have been imprisoned because of their political views and political commitment may be able to better cope with the hurt resulting from their imprisonment than persons without an activist background. It is easier for political activists to categorise this kind of experience as a coherent part of their life story. Accordingly, on a collective level, sharing an idea of a different political and social future can help people to deal differently with their experience of suffering. Thus, *community-feeling* is also closely linked to people's future orientation. It is noticeable that this feeling played in situations in which the interviewees reported injuries an important role.

Alfred Adler, who coined the definition of the concept of *community-feeling*<sup>5</sup> in his individual psychology, emphasises empathy as an essential characteristic of a sense of belonging; it is about "Mit den Augen eines anderen zu sehen, mit den Ohren eines anderen zu hören, mit dem Herzen eines anderen zu fühlen" (1982, p. 224), roughly translated as *seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another, feeling with the heart of another*. For Hans-Joachim Hannich, the *community-feeling* is characterised by the desire to take part in other people's lives and to master challenges together (2018, p. 56). The *community-feeling* is thus expressed through the way of life in which one identifies empathetically with other people by being supportive within the group of protesters and taking care of each other.

While the IR uses violent oppression to quell the protests and thus prevent a social fragmentation, the relationship between the protesters is characterised by solidarity, a sense of duty

<sup>5</sup> In German: *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*

and a willingness to make sacrifices, according to the interviewees. Their community is formed not only based on these attitudes and feelings towards other protesters but also on shared values and goals, for example: unifying objectives, common enemies, collective memory and/or shared impactful experiences, as well as meaningful symbols, leadership figures, role models, and ideas. The *community-feeling* or solidarity in the interviews within various solidarity communities is thus observable. One of these communities encompasses the protest movement as a whole or the specific group of protesters in a specific city or during a particular demonstration, while familial and friendly solidarity communities were also described.

The different levels and degrees of *community-feeling* are bonding links of something that made long-term resistance possible. Not surprisingly, shaking the protesters' *community-feeling* was vital in suppressing their resistance. Despite the diverse political and social backgrounds and social status of some of the interviewees, they point to something that drives them out-of-the-house when describing the situations that have led them to protest on the streets. A *community-feeling* seems to develop out of the rage over the oppression of a *compassionate-other*, distress over the loss of a *compassionate-other*, and identifying oneself with the *oppressed-other*. Consequently, it is necessary to do something to improve the situation for oneself and the *others*, sacrificing oneself to achieve a better situation. This leads to a conviction of concerning oneself as a larger *we*.

There have been many protests in ..., but this time those who were afraid to go [to the street] have closed their stores as a sign of protest. Those who came — we were really in a revolutionary situation. Look, a revolutionary situation — in many places in the world when a revolution is sparked in a city or a country, a revolutionary situation affects people's feelings [and] the everyday life of that community. Work and things like that no longer had any meaning for us. (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 104)

People really resisted them. People had really reached a point, [as if] they were fed up with their own lives. The people who always had arguments and were divided and fearful regarding uprisings and protests were really united this time. I mean, you really no longer saw this disunity among people. (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, 124)

The quotes from Shuresh, in particular, show that people who might not have belonged to the same community of solidarity without the “revolutionary situation” were suddenly allied. The “revolutionary situation” and the *community-feeling* are closely interlinked and therefore mutually dependent. Thus, over the recent protests, the various components of social solidarity are evidence of its revolutionary nature. This self-understanding as a group, the mutual recognition of being group members is based on shared convictions and an emotional commitment to the collective.

According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner, social identity is formed from social categorisation through group membership, which in turn is maintained through social comparison. As a result of the devaluation of the other group(s), one's own group is valorised, which Tajfel and Turner refer to as social distinction (Turner, 1975; see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Shuresh, as well as Azad, show this clearly in their interviews; both of them make clear distinctions between the in-group and the out-group, characterised as *we*-protesters and those-oppressors. In addition to social affiliation, cultural aspects also play a role in the development of social identity: “Cultural attributes like distinctive beliefs, institutions, practices, religion, and language often form the bases of identity” (Regmi, 2003, p. 3). Culturally shaped contents thus attribute to the creation of an orientation system that forms the basis for a social group. As described by the interviewees, group identification goes hand in hand with certain behaviours and ascriptions.

#### *Embracing Responsibility and Duty*

Protesters view themselves as integral parts of the broader society, recognising their responsibility for effecting change and understanding the significance of their roles. Within this unspoken, invisible arrangement, each individual assumes a distinct role.

Azad, who had given her workplace to the protest organisers for preparations and equipment and being a member of the organising team herself, views her involvement as a

collective effort towards a common *goal*, the realisation of the revolution. “Everyone undertook some part of the work — “We were striving for our revolution” (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 57). Shuresh also feels responsible for the collective, as he makes his workplace available to help the wounded and those who have been shot (Interview with Shuresh, 23rd June 2023, para. 64). Both consider themselves accountable to the community and risk their lives to do so. Their unwavering commitment to the cause, even in witnessing extreme violence, such as targeted shooting, is remarkable. It appears they have come to terms with the potential harm and danger in pursuing their goal. Azad’s dedication to fulfilling her role in the field continued to persist, even throughout her detention. Recounting the conversations that transpired between her and her interrogator during the arrest — which happened after enduring sexual assault as well as physical and mental torture — strongly reflects her self-awareness about the situation and self-determination to effect change. Azad repeated, with a lump in her throat and shaky voice, what she had said to the interrogator after he accused her of causing disturbance: “No! I did not create any disturbance, I am protesting, I am carrying out a revolution, for my existence, for my humanity, for my womanhood [being a woman] for those crimes I did not commit, what are you doing to us?” (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 65).

In her memory, she answered the interrogator’s questions promptly and confidently. In Azad’s eyes, she is righteous and has not committed any crimes, but the right she fought for (and continues to fight for) goes beyond the legal institutions of her country — Azad sees it as her social responsibility to fight for these (human) rights. By elevating “protesting” to “carrying out a revolution”, she makes it clear that she is prepared to fight for fundamental and structural changes. By doing so, even though she initially only speaks for herself, she expresses her belonging to the group of protesters. Despite the knowledge of the IR’s brutal behaviour, she feels connected to the protest community and possibly sees her steadfastness as her social role in the community. The personal goals for which she took to the streets and which she named during the interrogation seem to align with the goals of the protest movement anchored in the slogan *Zhin, Zhîyan, Azadî*. The protest movement does not represent a homogeneous group united in all its goals; however, the individual groups and each individual themselves become a movement as they unite behind the slogan and the associated values.<sup>6</sup> Azad feels a strong sense of duty to fight for these values, especially towards all those who suffer from the system. Her question indicates that she perceives herself as part of this community of suffering that has emerged, in part, over the past decades due to the ongoing oppressions by the IR. The pain she experienced during the interrogation sessions appear to extend beyond herself and her physical body, encompassing the entire community. Individuals who identify with this community view their experienced suffering and pain within the context of the group. The sense of belonging means that the suffering is experienced together, which in turn means that suffering can be endured (over a longer period of time). The shared experience of suffering leads to growing closer together and an increased sense of duty towards those suffering, even to the point of risking one’s own life for that of others.

#### *Sacrifice and the Protection of the “Collective Us”*

One frequent aspect observed with regard to street protests and oppression is the act of safeguarding fellow participants — and all those who are regarded as part of the *collective us* — and sacrificing one’s interest (including one’s peace, health, and financial interest) to further their collective objectives. The interviewees emphasise the unity of the protest community in exposing themselves to risk for others.<sup>7</sup> Sora described her commitment to solidarity with the protest community:

I remember there was a very old lady who was barely walking; the presence of that lady in the crowd gave me great encouragement. When the guards started shooting from that special lane [BRT<sup>8</sup>] towards the sidewalk, I went and hugged that lady, that if she was going to get shot, the bullet would hit me and not her because I

<sup>6</sup> The protest movement itself is not a homogeneous group, as it emerged from different, separate ethnic groups and (analogous) joined other protest movements (such as the labour movement) to demonstrate together with the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement (Afary & Anderson, 2023, p. 98).

<sup>7</sup> Shuresh states: “My motivation, the motivation of those who came, the motivation of those who were killed, was to build a future for our children” (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 106).

<sup>8</sup> BRT stands for the Bus Rapid Transit and refers to the dedicated bus lanes which are separated from other road traffic. During the protests, these busways were used to transport state forces and maintain control over the streets.

could have run after that, but she couldn't. There was another older lady there. I hugged both women. They told me that this is the only thing they can do: to come to the street, and they can't do anything else. (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 25)

She is someone who, in critical moments, carefully considers how to sustain the cause, and safeguard *us* against *them* with minimal harm for the group. Sora believes it is her duty to protect these elderly women and emphasises her willingness to sacrifice herself for the people who are strangers to her. Stressing the perceived age of these women, Sora indicates not only the larger effort they are willing to make, but also the potentially higher risk of being harmed due to the limitations of their mobility. The fact that these elderly women expose themselves during the street protest to these dangers could explain Sora's identification with them. It seems that Sora had anticipated that she has to protect these women because they are making an extraordinary effort to be part of the protest community. We want to underscore that instead of running away or laying on the ground to reduce the risk of getting shot, Sora is actively walking towards these women and deliberately making herself a human shield for them. It would appear that Sora found strength in her own body; she viewed it as a form of protection for these elderly ladies despite the potent killing power of the bullets. This asymmetry of resources and strategies used by the security forces and the protestors is, in this situation, no impediment for Sora to be in solidarity with others and is an indication of how deep the *community-feeling* is. This affective cohesion is so deeply embedded in Sora; the lives of those group members who are alive and have survived, and possibly also those who are perceived as weaker, are considered more valuable than her own during that specific moment.

Also, other interviewees shared how they were willing to sacrifice themselves for the movement. Azad, for example, stated that before joining the protest, she was conscious about the danger of being killed. In the face of this threat to her life (and the lives of others in general), she started to attend the protests to raise her voice against the suppression by the regime (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 57). Similar to Sora's motivation, seeing protestors being harmed and killed seems to be an important motivation for Azad to take action. Zhina's killing, as well as the killing and violation of protestors, suggest that the violence perpetrated is viewed as a declaration of war against the *us*, and Sora and Azad are prepared to sacrifice their own lives to protect the collective *us*.

#### *The Power of Solidarity and Collective Action*

The question as to what empowers the protestors to continue to risk their lives in the face of violence, and to confront the organised aggression, despite the constant threat of indiscriminate gunfire, needs to be answered. Here, Shuresh sheds light on the source of strength he felt during the protest days:

But this time, even though ten people were killed in a week, even though many people were wounded, I personally went to the protests with wounded legs, with bleeding legs, and I saw people, and more than that, I saw how women really came to stand by men, ... The unity of the people, the unity of those who—as we say, the grey [politically neutral] stratum and the stratum that is really protesting. Even the grey stratum did everything they could for the protests. I mean, the dealers, by being sealed—by closing their stores [striking]. I saw such a number of women coming to the demonstrations, coming to the protests, and chanting the more radical slogans against the government much more fearlessly than before, yes, we really said, this time it has to be something, this time it has to work. (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 108, authors' emphasis)

It is hard to overlook Shuresh usage of the term "people" when describing the source of his own will to resist. After recounting the immense oppression they have endured, he circles back to the people and completes his initial statement with "the unity of the people" (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 108). Closing stores is a form of protest in which the shopkeepers solidarise with the group of protestors. Shuresh reported several times that shopkeepers made their

stores available to care for the injured (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 38)<sup>9</sup>. The people's unity and solidarity<sup>10</sup> drew many to the streets for the first time — the same force that compels Shuresh to return to the protests, even when wounded. Shuresh clearly attributes hope to the stronger and more intense *community-feeling* within the protest movement: he belongs to the group of people who state that these protests feel different because more people from various social strata, and women in particular, are taking to the streets more fearlessly.

Likewise, Azad considers the presence of the collective and concerted action towards a shared objective as the wellspring of power. For Azad, this power not only emboldens the individuals to take risks but also possesses the capability to rattle oppressive forces; she states:

During the protests, when we were in the crowd, we really felt strong, we were very happy because [we had] each other. We hoped that our protests [would] be successful. You know, we had a goal, that's why we were doing these things. It was not out of affluenza. Because we really had a goal, we went united, hand-in-hand with each other; we fought, at that time [we were not afraid] not at all, I mean, by God, the agents ran away from us, they were afraid of the crowd, of our unity. (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 75)

In addition to the political and social goals pursued by the participants, the feeling of being part of a united mass of people — sometimes even experienced as a feeling of happiness — is probably another reason to take part in the protests. This is evident in Azad's almost proud-sounding account of the security forces' fear of the demonstrators.

In two of the interviews, we see that the solidarity and the *community-feeling* extend beyond Iran's borders. Even though Sepideh and Azad have decided to leave the country, they still feel connected to the community of protesters in Iran. Simultaneously, being separated from the support of the collective, experiencing isolation, and spatial distances intensifies their suffering.

Sepideh's approach in dealing with guilt involves immersing herself in actions that reaffirm her solidarity with *us*. She emphasises that it is vital for her to continue to stand up for her home country. Despite being apart, she refuses to perceive herself as detached from the cause and instead assigns herself renewed responsibilities as a protester.

A similar approach is evident in Azad's perspective. Azad's statements are evidence of possessing a very strong will: As she conveys her emotions regarding her involvement in the protests, despite the overwhelming terror, harm, and fear it entailed, she characterises her being an active participant of the movement as "really very good" (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 91). Her statements about her time in Germany indicate that maybe this positive sentiment is derived from a sense of efficacy for the community. For Azad, even forced migration should not disrupt her commitment to responsibility and solidarity. Furthermore, solidarity and participation in collective actions can be perceived as a potential remedy to alleviate collective suffering. In her quest for solidarity, while being distanced from her community, Azad regards any action she believes can raise awareness about the suffering of the oppressed *me* and *us* as valuable. Despite the emotional pain it causes, she deems it necessary to share her experiences and speak up about her traumas. Finding solidarity may even make the burden of traumatic experiences more tolerable.

Azad impressively described the lifelong consequences of experiencing violence, particularly on an emotional level. Her emotional damage would appear even in the banality of everyday life: because of the inability to forget these feelings, suffering becomes something ordinary that accompanies her even during routine activities such as showering and eating. While sharing her experiences may not alleviate the emotional burden, it provides solace in knowing she is not alone in grappling with these sentiments. Noticeably, the *community-feeling* was often emphasised in direct connection with stories about injuries.

It seems that unity, solidarity, and engagement in something of great significance, such as contributing to a profound transformation, a revolution, could, to some extent, provide the inner

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Shuresh, Sora also mentioned in her interview the support she received from shopkeepers who gave her refuge when she fled from the security forces and their tear gas attacks (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 22).

<sup>10</sup> For further information on the used understanding of solidarity, see Angehrn, 2001, p. 19; Zheng, 2022, p. 900.



fortitude needed to endure physical pain and other looming threats. Thus, *community-feeling* seems to be crucial in understanding why people continue to engage in the protests up to a certain point despite the prevailing violence they face.

### Contours of Resistance

In 2017, a solo protester named Vida Movahed, climbed onto an electricity box on Enqelab (i.e., revolution) Street, took off her headscarf, and waved it on a stick above her head as an expression of her protest against the hijab requirement. This act led to further protests against the hijab requirement (Afary & Anderson, 2023, p. 97), known as the “*Girls of Enqelab*” protests. In conjunction with the current protests, videos showing individual women standing up against the repressive regulations have increased in appearance. Even though the actions are performed by the women individually and in isolation, one could assume the community of protesters is being perceived as always — physically or symbolically — behind this action. By repeatedly performing and perpetuating this potentially iconic expression of resistance, it could be said that these women are aligning themselves with a tradition of uprising, and thus also with the line of women who have stood on electrical boxes or other public places before them.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, during the 2022–2023 protests, a group of young women communicated with each other by spray-painting slogans on the walls at night, which were then made unrecognisable by supporters of the IR during the day (Rasooli, 2022). These acts of resistance can also reassure the protest community: they result from the *community-feeling* and further strengthen it.

Resistance constitutes a complex concept, characterised by substantial ambiguity in its definition. While some scholars posit the intention and awareness of actors serve as pivotal factors in classifying behaviours as acts of resistance, Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner (2004) contend that the realisation of actors’ intentions is not always straightforward; facing challenges that render it an unreliable criterion (p. 542). The revolutionary and inclusive nature of the 2022–2023 street protests might lead some minds directly to *overt resistance*, which is a “behavior that is visible and readily recognized by both targets and observers as resistance and, further, is intended to be recognized as such” (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545). This is primarily a characteristic of organised resistance. Relying only on the notion of overt resistance precludes us from understanding other types of resistance in the context of revolutionary movements. Along with overt resistance, James Scott’s concept of *everyday resistance* contains elements that can be useful in understanding resistance in this context. He defines everyday resistance as:

[A]ny act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes. (Scott, 1985, p. 290)

It is evident that from Scott’s (1990) definition, the intention and consciousness of actors are significant elements of everyday resistance. However, as discussed above, actors’ intentions are not always possible to achieve. Hollander and Einwohner bring to the fore that “actors may be unable to fully articulate their motivations in terms that would be recognized as resistant by the interviewer” or they want to hide it despite their intention to resist (2004, p. 542). In addition, it is even possible that the resisters are not aware of their resistance, but the external observer categorises their actions as resistance. In the topology that Hollander and Einwohner suggest, they define the latter as *externally-defined resistance*, which is “resistance that [is] neither intended nor recognized as resistance by actors or their targets, but [is labelled] resistance by third parties” (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545).

<sup>11</sup> Bayat (2010) describes such decentralised, often individually carried out protest actions as social *nonmovement*, which are “collective actions of noncollective actors” and based less on an ideological motivation and more on the protest action itself (Bayat, 2010, p. 29). An Iranian writer, a woman who publishes texts under the pseudonym L, also comments on this: “A transition from the narration of an everyday circumstance to the creation of a historic situation. A shift from an individual speaking about herself and her desire, to a silent, fixed figure. A figure of resistance” (L, 2022).

### *Practising Resistance*

Looking at the interviews, a nuanced understanding of resistance unfolds, exposing its dynamic nature influenced by contextual factors. This is particularly evident in the case of Shuresh. He underscores the political legacy ingrained within his family, affirming that: “We have always endeavoured to uphold the resistance. To secure rights for ourselves, for our progeny, and for our people” (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 38).

Such acknowledgments of resistance aligns with Scott’s notion of everyday resistance, signifying intended actions undertaken by individuals or groups with a defined objective against superordinates. Subsequently, when queried about the meaning of resistance, he conceptualises it as the miracle of protests:

Resistance, resistance, resistance. I can’t remember protests ever lasting longer than two days. In Kurdistan. In many of the cities ... Look, for more than a month and a half, more than two months, people were living physically on the streets. So, you didn’t see a family where either one person wasn’t arrested. In many of the families, one person was killed, in many of the families you saw some people who were seriously injured. [Still] injured ... Absolutely all the people were standing hand in hand. Against these crimes and brutality. (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 126)

In this context, he perceives resistance as evident in the persistence of protests despite the extreme violence — “crime and brutality” — and confrontations with suppressors (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 126). His conceptualisation of resistance appears to align with overt resistance, although the immediate intention and awareness during these acts remain uncertain — it is unclear whether he possessed such awareness at the very moment of resisting or whether it is an interpretation he retrospectively attributed to those actions and behaviours. However, when specifically questioned about the meaning of resistance for him, he says: “Actually, now that for me ... I have a problem. For me it is a question of my life. It’s not a question of social resistance, civic activism, and those things” (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 128). In his recent statement, he appears to confine an identification resistance solely within the context of organised protests and disobedience. He does not categorise his post-release actions as resistance. Rather, he associates resistance with “social resistance” and “civic activism,” and simultaneously tends to distance himself from these activities due to the negative impact they have had on his personal life (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 128). Shuresh seems to have changed the personal significance of the protests over time. Although he may continue to adhere to social and political goals, he now prioritises his survival. Nevertheless, when asked about his motivation for participating in the current research, he responds:

Because the truth must be told. The true word must be spoken. Now, it is not clear what will happen to us. We are like very many others who—very many good souls who were very good people were killed. In the end, we are also a part of this society, and we have to pay the price [do our part]. For example, I don’t know when they will call me again. What accusations, what labels they will throw at me to put me back in prison or, God forbid, have me executed. (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 166)

Shuresh expresses a deliberate intent to resist oppression, aiming to hinder the IR’s spread of false information or concealment of the truth. For Shuresh, who lives a semi-clandestine life, participating in the interview is just one example of his daily resistance. His participation requires multiple forms of defiance, which could have cost him his life. Though he may not intend to overtly resist or explicitly label his efforts to tell the truth as resistance, these actions can be classified more precisely as externally-defined everyday resistance, as suggested by Hollander and Einwohner (2004, p. 545).

The other interviewees mentioned several forms of overt resistance. Sepideh, who reported quite a lot about protest actions at the university, describes an act of resistance in which the aspect of communitisation also becomes clear:

Now, every day we would do something, sometimes it wasn't that bad, sometimes we were jump [*sic*] over the fences, sometimes professors, who had access to another door, would sneak us out. We did that a couple of times, then they [incomprehensible] gathered all the professors' cards so, that they would—the professors even couldn't access to the doors anymore. (Interview with Sepideh, April 27, 2023, para. 27)

Sepideh emphasises the regularity of the protests, which indicates that at a certain point, one can speak of a particular routine — the protests seem to have become a fixed, perhaps even regular, part of everyday life; they were omnipresent. Professors who helped the students leave the building are named as actors who show solidarity with the protest community. It thus describes a form of covert, inconspicuous, and unnoticed resistance (Scott, 1990, p. 198). Through their acts of resistance, they risk oppression and sanctions by the IR.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the interview, Azad recounted the moments of overtly resisting the attacks of IR security forces. For instance, the construction of barricades not only served as protection against gunfire; but also as a counter-strategy aimed at impeding the advancement of security forces. Azad's narrative underscores the collective characteristics of protest dynamics, emphasising the group's actions over individual efforts, in which power asymmetry is addressed alongside the protest dynamic:

We used to throw stones. They used bullets, rifle bullets [laughing], we used like, stones. You may not believe it, but we were also surprised: What's with all these stones were in the streets? [laughing]. The agents themselves were terrified. They were scared. (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 77)

This shows how collective cohesion — to one's own surprise — is not only able to offer resistance with supposedly inferior material means, but also to awaken fear in the attackers and thus experience self-efficacy, which reduces one's own fears. Sora highlighted the role of the community in the act of resistance:

We were heavily attacked in [a square in my town]. They were throwing terrible gas towards us. And then I remembered my friend's words; I started asking passers-by for cigarettes. Everyone started lighting cigarettes and blowing into each other's eyes. It was a strange scene. You saw a person who is coughing, has tears running down his face, and wants cigarette smoke. (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 19)

In addition to protesting, Sora describes another form of resistance against the power of the IR. The protesters find, in the community, a creative way to deal with the injury caused by the attack by the security forces and thereby also a way of overcoming the concrete crisis. Reacting to gas with smoke seems contradictory at first, but according to experiences from previous protests, it seems to be the only way to protect oneself from the gas in that moment.

Previously, Sora did not have this knowledge, which was why she did not have any cigarettes with her despite a friend's advice to take them with her to the protests. It was not until the usage of tear gas and all the protesters who gathered lit up their cigarettes, that she realised the benefits of cigarette smoke against tear gas; this knowledge thus becomes part of this community.

The aspect of solidarity also takes on an important role here because of individual action when one follows Sora's explanations and relates to the collective of protesters: cigarettes are shared among the protesters and cigarette smoke is blown in each other's faces.

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<sup>12</sup> During the *Zhin, Zhīyan, Azadī* protests, a large number of university teachers were dismissed (Iran Wire, 2023b; Women's Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran [WNCRI], 2023; Motamedi, 2023).

### *Resistance in Isolation*

Collective resistance, as explored previously, may not always be viable, particularly when the objective of political repression is to dismantle the walls of resistance and solidarity. However, this does not imply the absence of resistance.

Azad shows that the community does not always have to be physically present for resistance. During her interrogation, to which she was summoned because she participated in the protests, Azad begins to argue with the security guard. Her resistant behaviour becomes particularly clear at this point — despite the isolation and being at the mercy of the interrogator, she demonstrates her ability to act.

He touched my breast and stuck me to the chair, at that moment my heart was breaking out of my body, I mean, it was such a scene, I just screamed. He said: “Shut up, you should have thought about this moment when you were doing a lot of things”. Well, I didn’t say anything. I didn’t say anything until someone he left — someone came because em his voice wasn’t the same as before, he came for the interrogation [sniffing]. He said: “Do you want hijab?” I said: “No!” He said: “Then what?” I said: “I want to be free, I am a human, ... I really want to choose my own clothes, to be able to speak freely, not to be afraid when I walk in the street”. He said: “Aha, so [if] you want this, you have to want many other things as well”. I said: “Like what?” He said: “Right now if I want to rape you, you shouldn’t say anything”. I said [in a harsh tone]: “What does this have to do with that?” He said: “You want *Bi-Namusi*<sup>13</sup>, I will give you *Bi-Namusi*”. I said: “No, who said that?! I don’t want it like this! I [just] say that what’s wrong with that, [if] one strand of my hair is visible, what’s wrong with that, ... [if I want] to wear comfortable pants, the wind breeze my skin, what’s wrong with that?” I — [he said] “No, you’re [sexually] stimulating us. Just by sitting you here, I’m aroused.” I said, “This is your problem, you are mentally ill, you are sexually ill, you see any woman you want as a sexual tool, it’s not my problem.” (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 63)

The interrogator’s questions aimed to defame Azad and force a confession; however, she remained firm, citing human rights and a desire for freedom, focusing on human rights in general rather than clothing. The interrogator equates her freedom with frivolity and accuses her of seeking an immoral lifestyle. Azad’s response challenges this, maintaining her agency and expressing indignation at the interrogator’s insinuations. Azad’s response to the sexual harassment is remarkably direct, almost as if, for a brief moment, she ignored the obvious power asymmetry. It seems that even in this isolated situation, she can reclaim her resistance that has developed in the protest community and still helps her to deal with the harm she has experienced.

### *The Deceased as Accelerant of the Uprising*

Given the high number of killings and the importance of funeral processions, one could assume that the entire protest is a funeral march. The struggle for freedom described by the interviewees is very often also a struggle to mourn the deceased protest participants. As people were killed during the protests, their deaths, and thus also the subsequent funeral marches and ceremonies on death anniversaries, take on a political significance.<sup>14</sup> The act of mourning thus becomes an act of resistance (Ryan, 2015, p. 310). For instance, the killing of Shuresh’s friend, Pirooz, has been

<sup>13</sup> *Bi-Namusi* is often translated as dishonour, but in order to retain its specific meaning, the original Farsi word is used (For further information, see King, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> There is a variety of mourning rituals in Iran and they have a special significance among various cultures in Iran. For example, major mourning rituals are held to mark the 40th day after one’s death (Karimitar, 2019). After the deaths of Zhina-Mahsa Amini and Armita Garawand, protesters mourned at the graves of the deceased (Dehkordi, 2023; RFE/RL’s Radio Farda, 2023). The violent suppression of the mourning rituals at the graves is also mentioned in the media (Dehkordi, 2023; Tabrizy et al., 2023).

ascribed meaning and significance in retrospect and he is celebrated as a martyr by the community of protesters:

He was in our arms when he was killed, became a martyr. We took him to the cemetery that same evening, the Revolutionary Guards wanted his corpse handed over, they didn't want to give us the corpse. We brought him in with great difficulty — they shot us with shotgun pellets while, as I said, the body was already with us, and we were going to bury it and they shot at our legs. Women and children had come to stop the forces, so that the corpse [would] not fall into the hands of Guards, to say, "No, someone else killed him." (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 66)

This strong sense of solidarity and community among the protesters seems to reduce their vulnerability to repression. Despite the violence against the mourners, they are not dissuaded from carrying out mourning rituals, in particular the burial of the body. In this situation, the protesters show great perseverance and, above all, assertiveness against the security forces and can act despite formidable threats. They find a way to resist these threats in solidarity with the community.

All interviewees display a strong sense of responsibility towards the community and, as a result, a sense of obligation. The feeling of connectedness is further supported in particular by the remembrance of the people who have given their lives up for the protests, people who experienced a great deal of suffering and pain in the context of the protests. People who take part in the protests feel obliged to continue with their actions in carrying out the revolution — despite the many victims — thus giving meaning to the deaths of the protest participants.

In addition, the designation of a person as a martyr retrospectively ascribes meaning to their death. It is a narrative construct with a meaningful character for the social group to which the deceased person belonged to. The deceased are not simply victimised even if they are portrayed as innocent and powerless victims of (state) violence. Instead, this narrative is also reinterpreted as an empowering narrative, thereby heroising the deceased (Buckner & Khatib, 2014, p. 378; Gölz, 2019, p. 5). "In turn, martyrs' images imbued their people with a sense of agency, because it is the people who have narrative agency over the stories of the martyrs" (Buckner & Khatib, 2014, p. 377). Pirooz's death has several implications for the protest community in terms of heroisation. By embedding his death in narratives about protest, resistance, and the victims of oppression, he is attributed agency beyond his death and is not simply forgotten in the narratives. In addition, his death and the stories about his death have an empowering function for the protest community; the martyr concept fulfils a communalising function (Gözl, 2019, p. 6). The perceived injustice of the death of a person from the community can strengthen the general will of the group and reinforce the image of the hostile (Benson-Sokmen, 2019, p. 13; Gözl, 2019, p. 49). The telling of martyr stories can be seen as a form of resistance, which empowers protesters to participate (more strongly) in the protests themselves despite the oppression.

Another driver that is not explicitly addressed by other interviewees is vengeance; a (mostly) unspoken desire for vengeance, which, has played a seemingly pivotal role in motivating and driving Shuresh's active involvement in planning and participating in protests. He shared that vengeance had not only driven him personally, but also the community, to become more involved in the protests to avenge deceased friends. In this context, revenge is intertwined with a sense of indignation, which according to Azad "nothing could stop it" (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 114). It functions as a form of protection by protecting the memory and voice of the aligned other, preventing them from fading into oblivion, while also being an endeavour to traverse the trauma of losing *someone* — an *innocent* one. Hence, engaging in protests to seek retribution for loved ones and acquaintances can represent one of the initial strategies for encountering trauma. It might also serve as a collective response to collective trauma. As scholars point out, this reveals the productive power of injury in that the pain is transformed into a drive that gives the protesters the willpower to continue protesting (Honari, 2018, p. 958; Reynolds, 2020, pp. 352–353). This can also be seen in the interviewees, where frustration, combined with the desire for vengeance and collectively shared visions about a better future, seems to unleash such a force. Shuresh stated that the "people were at a point where they were putting their lives at risk" (Interview with Shuresh, June 23, 2023, para. 122). This is an impressive example of the importance of a *community-feeling* for the people taking part in the protests. Consequently, moving forward is not a

decision for death, but a stand for the fight against political repression and thus for the revolution, which can end in death (Buckner & Khatib, 2014, p. 370).

### Contours of Vulnerability

The interviewees also illustrated that their experiences made them vulnerable. In the interview excerpts discussed so far, the ability to continue protesting despite the emotional and physical consequences of the individuals tended to predominate, but vulnerability was also recognisable. Vulnerability was revealed in the fact that the individuals' actions and decisions were influenced by the experiences of violence. In this paper, we use the definition of vulnerability by Hans-Joachim Bürkner, who defines it as follows:

Unter „Vulnerabilität“ wird die Verletzlichkeit oder Verletzbarkeit einer Person, einer sozialen Gruppe, eines Gegenstandes oder eines Systems angesichts bestehender Gefährdungen, Risiken, Krisen, Stress, Schocks oder bereits eingetretener schädigender Ereignisse verstanden. Die Verletzung oder Schädigung bedeutet in der Regel, dass wichtige Funktionen eingeschränkt oder nicht mehr vorhanden sind. Eine wesentliche Bedingung der Vulnerabilität besteht in unzureichenden Bewältigungskapazitäten der Individuen, Gruppen und Systeme. [“Vulnerability” is understood as the violability of a person, a social group, an object or a system in the face of existing hazards, risks, crises, stress, shocks or damaging events that have already occurred. Injury or damage usually means that important functions are restricted or no longer available. A key condition of vulnerability is the inadequate coping capacity of individuals, groups or systems]. (Bürkner, 2010, p. 24)

Jörg Zirfas identified another important dimension of vulnerability. He distinguishes between actual injury and the possibility of injury, which he calls violability. Individuals do not have to be injured, the possibility or likelihood of being injured is enough to make them vulnerable (Zirfas, 2020, p. 55).

### Harming Isolation

Community and a sense of solidarity are elementary factors that can lead to the ability to still take part in the protests, despite the negative emotional and physical consequences that result from it. Especially in situations where the protesters are in the community, the intense power of the community becomes visible. As illustrated in the analysis of Azad's interrogation situation, *community-feeling* can strengthen resistance even in isolation. However, Azad also appeared extremely vulnerable and frightened in this situation:

During the protests, when we were in the crowd, we really felt strong, we were very happy because of [having] each other. ... But when they arrested [me] individually, I was completely terrified; completely. I was trembling. They themselves knew. My lips were white. My mouth was dry. (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 75)

It is the situation of isolation from the collective that instils fear in an individual. This drastic difference between the communal experience of a potentially dangerous and violent situation during the protests and the fearful situation in isolation illustrates the far-reaching influence of the *community-feeling* on the perception of threat. Because Azad feels fear in the interrogation situation, this makes her more vulnerable. While the isolation of detention provided a context for exerting defiance and resistance, as discussed above, it was the interplay between resistance and vulnerability that shaped the overall response.

During the interrogation, Azad could not rely directly on the community's solidarity and is initially left to her own devices. For example, her husband was not allowed to enter the building and she was not allowed to tell anyone about the questioning, which reinforces her vulnerability.

As she had to deal with this situation on her own, with neither her closest confidants nor the protest community present, she felt insecure. In addition to the psychological experience of the questioning, Azad also addresses the physical effects the incident had on her. She described the visible consequences of the injury inflicted on her during the interrogation:

My husband delivered a corpse. In these two days, I can easily say that I lost seven kilos. My face was white; [like] plaster. There was no blood left in my body at all. My husband was going crazy, he had seen the marks of their hands on my body. (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 65)

At several points in the interview, Azad mentioned that she was not given any food or water for 48 hours, that she was blindfolded, and that she was tied up and abused. In both quotes, Azad used words (e.g., white lips, corpse, bloodless) that are semantically related to *death*. The statement that a corpse had been delivered to her husband could therefore be interpreted to mean that Azad had the feeling as if all life had left her body due to the fear and stress. Azad internalised the fear and insecurity so much that she isolated herself after this experience and shared that she was even afraid and terrified of her own shadow (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 65). Azad's experience illustrates that the effects of the interrogation situation reached far beyond the actual situation and caused her to be afraid of everything and everyone.

#### *Decisions in the Face of Threats*

Throughout the whole interview with Azad, pauses and changes in voice indicate a high level of emotionality; sometimes, it would seem that Azad is immersed in the memory and the injury again, in the moment, in which she was describing her experiences. This can be seen in the following scene:

We were constantly threatened. I was released on bond, after forty-eight hours. What — I am remembering the scene right now. [pause] I really don't know how to describe it. Horrible, awful. In all senses, all. That is, I wished for death every day [crying with lump in throat]. ... After I was released ... I didn't send my child to school anymore. They said, "We will come and take him on the way to school. We will make you ache for it forever. We'll rape him and send him back to you." For what?! For my right. When they threaten you, no matter how much they threaten you, oppress you, rape you, [with a trembling voice and anger] you say, they raped [me], I have nothing left. I have nothing left. They threatened me and darkened my life, I go, I continue. But when they threaten your child, they threaten your ... child, you have to stop at some point. You have to! For the child, you are responsible for. This is exactly how my life turned out. I came out of detention, crying, every day, every day. My husband would come close to me, I would scream. He wanted to hug me to calm me down, but I would scream. I hated. I was disgusted with every man. I mean, I felt so bad. I went to a psychiatrist. I was so scared, terribly. Look, I'm just saying that [you] can't imagine [someone] touching your intimate area, raping you. It's terrible. So terrible. [pause] But it happened. We have experienced that. (Interview with Azad, May 27, 2023, para. 59)

She indicated her immersion in the scene by saying she can still visualise it. Initially unable to verbalise the experience, she helped the interviewer understand by using adjectives like "horrible" and "awful." Her injuries extended beyond her time in custody, impacting her relationship with her husband. Due to the sexual abuse in prison, she was not initially able to allow intimacy after release, feeling anxiety, disgust, and defensiveness toward her husband's efforts to support her. She has internalised the violation so deeply that every man becomes an interrogator. The violation refers not only to the abuse but also to the threat to her child.

For Azad, the threat to her child's safety is the only thing stopping her from taking part in the street protests. Faced with threats of violence and sexual assault, she had to choose between

her responsibility to her family and the broader collective. It was clear that protecting her family takes precedence, even deterring her from further protests. Her fears and concerns towards her family would seem to influence her decision to stop protesting more than the trauma of rape. In the solitude of detention, without solidarity from the collective, her responsibility toward her loved ones outweighed her social accountability.

In addition to the abduction, the threats she received consisted of the fact that worse things will be done to her child than acts that Azad has experienced herself. Because she will have to live with the consequence of living with a potentially severely traumatised child and thus be reminded daily of her supposed mistakes, Azad decided to first sign the declaration and then to leave Iran.

#### *Dynamics of Resistance — From Defiance to Exhaustion*

The simultaneity of vulnerability and resistance is also evident in Sepideh's interview, when she stated that the protesters have nothing left to lose.

So, and we've been shot, we have been captured [swallows] we have been em hit ... physically, mentally, all of that. And so, every day, we really didn't have anything to lose. We were like, what you gonna do [laughing] that you haven't done before? So that made us go everywhere, every day. But I, I mean, I came here after a lot a lot of people didn't do anything, not anything but, I think they run out of energy, or the will that they can do anything about it. It seems every day it's harder to believe that you can change. And after a while it comes this blackness that if it does change is it ever gonna be better? ... So, that was the reason that we were going every day, and this is the reason I think that we are stop going every day [voice is getting thinner]. (Interview with Sepideh, April 27, 2023, para. 73)

Having nothing left to lose can both motivate and demotivate people. For Sepideh, this feeling motivated her to continue protesting despite the daily oppression by security forces. She emphasised the unity of the protesters: The community feeling plays a crucial role, as shared suffering makes it bearable. Sepideh's statement implies persistence despite injury. However, she also noted fatigue within the community, attributed to the lack of hope for change. This lack of perspective leads to a fatalistic fear that either nothing will change or things will get worse.

Over time, however, according to Sepideh, the motivation behind the violent oppression of people, especially women, has become more of an obstacle to protest participation. This reveals an ambivalence between *wanting* to continue protesting and *being able* to continue protesting. The hope of changing something by protesting, as Sepideh expressed it, seems to fade daily, so that the factor of time in the form of permanent and high levels of oppression, in addition to the *community-feeling*, also influences the possibilities of dealing with injury.

#### *Shattering of Everyday Life*

Sora spoke about many situations in which the protesters supported each other and stood up for each other; from blowing cigarette smoke in each other's faces in the spirit of solidarity to protecting other people with their own bodies. Common to all these stories is the strong sense of solidarity within the group of protesters. But most of these stories share an experience of injury as well, which in turn, prompts people to engage in these acts of solidarity. Like Azad, Sora refers to the regularity of oppression, which is not an everyday occurrence, even if it is experienced every day. The effects of the constant threat and witnessing the injury of other protest participants have left deep marks on Sora over the course of the protest weeks and months:

Many things happened on the street. There are many bad experiences. Every time you walk, you cry 1,000 times. You still cry. Seeing all these bad events in front of your eyes is not easy. I know not. I can't talk anymore. There are still a lot of things floating around in my head; [such] normal things, like going shopping suddenly wasn't like a normal day anymore because you took off your hijab. That fear, the fear of putting on a T-shirt, that



little by little we have all destroyed this hijab wall. This fear: Yesterday, I told a friend that even though eight months have passed, as long as that may be in your opinion, but it seems so short. Everything is contradictory. It has invaded even the slightest and smallest areas of our personal lives. Everything is mixed up. It is beautiful and it is not. I, I think often that I've become tired and can't [anymore] and the psychological burden is very tough for me. (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 26)

Sora related her injuries to two levels: experiencing repression during protests and the memory of these images that constantly haunt her. She used the hyperbole of “crying a thousand times” to address the intensity of her experiences. By stating that she continued to cry afterwards, she highlighted the enduring emotional burden of witnessing events in the streets. Sora sought order and access to her feelings amidst disturbing memories, trying to find words to express herself to the interviewer. She acknowledged her speechlessness while discovering a way to articulate it by describing persistent memories. She spoke of everyday resistance practices, turning normal situations into dangerous ones. Shopping, for example, becomes a protest action when wearing a T-shirt or not wearing a hijab.<sup>15</sup> Feelings of burden, being overwhelmed, and tiredness pervaded Sora's stories.

Everyday resistance would seem to show initial success, as this has destroyed the “hijab wall” (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 26). At the same time, however, the fear continued to affect the protesters over the eight-month period, leading to a tension between the euphoria and the desire for change on the one hand and the fear on the other. Sora emphasised the beauty of the contradictory, which ultimately also contains the revolutionary moment and enables a change. In this way, Sora summarises the paradox of the experiences of the revolution, which is also repeatedly echoed in the other interviews: the beauty of hope and solidarity; the cruelty of oppression. The constant high level of stress caused by the fear of being repressed combined with the many (everyday) successes in the fight for revolution exhausted Sora and led to a fatigue that could be traced back to precisely these contradictions and the fluctuation of feelings to which Sora is constantly exposed.

#### *The Shattering Effect of Executions*

Remembering one particularly memorable day of protests, Sora pointed to the 16th of Azar<sup>16</sup>, a day she deemed as extraordinary for her:

I had forgotten one point about the 16th of Azar that I should say. I think that day was wonderful. [The 16th of Azar is a] day [that] must get a place in the history books. I felt so good that day. Thinking about that day, all over [my] body, [I] still get goosebumps. It had finally happened! That sense of unity and unity of people, men, women, old and young. Everyone proved themselves to each other. As if that day we would have found confidence in how numerous we are. I saw so many times during this time that women took off their chadors and shouted loudly: “Down with Khamenei”. I saw old women walking and running side by side with us. This empathy was proven that day; that we are all together. And the next day he was executed. Mohsen Shekari was executed. Just to ruin and poison that happiness and that joy and verve and sense of unity and that collective enthusiasm of ours on [the] 16th of Azar, they executed Mohsen. We slept at night full of happiness and excitement and woke up with execution in the morning. I wanted to add this. [crying] I know the execution of Mohsen in my mind — Sorry ... execution. The day of the execution. I still can't understand these executions. As if this is a dream from which we will wake up. The 17th of Dey, before the 18th of Dey, before the anniversary of

<sup>15</sup> Her everyday life also changed dramatically when the café where she works was closed due to the disregard of the hijab requirement. As a result, Sora lost her financial livelihood for several months (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 4).

<sup>16</sup> December 6 or 7 of the Gregorian calendar.

the plane crash<sup>17</sup>, from that day on, I sank into a state of shock and a permanent emptiness, and I don't think I ever got out of it. (Interview with Sora, July 6, 2023, para. 28)

Sora expressed her wishes that this particular day should be entered into history books possibly also due to the incidents which occurred on the 16th of Azar in 1953<sup>18</sup>. For Sora, this day epitomises one of the most renowned protest slogans in Iran<sup>19</sup>, and she feels a strong connection to those she sympathises with. If one compares the protest dynamics from previous protests with this one, it becomes clear that this protest community is unique in its composition (Afary & Anderson, 2023, p. 84 and 87). While the *community-feeling* can enable people to be resistant, it can likewise create a certain vulnerability. This becomes clear when Sora spoke about the murder of Mohsen Shekari. Even though she probably did not know Mohsen Shekari personally, she felt very connected to him and his death evoked a strong sense of grief in her: the execution of Mohsen, akin to the loss of a family member, inflicted a deep emotional wound, causing her to experience a profound sense of grief. Mohsen's execution was not only a massive shock for Sora but for the entire protest community<sup>20</sup>.

Vulnerability, as well as the ability to act, despite the emotional and physical consequences, can significantly influence the type and extent of resistance. The IR uses massive violence to hurt and thus demotivate the protest community through targeted executions and imprisonment. The strong experience of community can also cause individuals to become vulnerable. The experienced suffering can thus be further intensified by the community. The *community-feeling* can, therefore, increase vulnerability but can also enable people to deal with suffering and injury in the long term. Potential vulnerability and actual injury, therefore, do not necessarily have to lead to an inability to act. All interviewees were able to endure the oppression over a longer period and even after the end of their street protests, some of them continued to look for opportunities to get involved in the community — sometimes while in exile.

## Discussion

The strong *community-feeling* is an answer to the research question about the motivations of people in Iran to continue participating in the protests despite violent political repression by the IR. The interviewees decided to take part in the protests for different reasons — for all of them, the *community-feeling* during the protests and in everyday life was an important factor in their participation in the protests. Increased participation in the protests was initiated by specific events, such as murders or injuries to people that affected them personally. The strong motivation to participate in the protests also stems from a deep conviction of right and wrong. People are united by the desire for justice, equality, freedom, and the pursuit of a better future. A deep sense of responsibility and solidarity emerges, contributing to the community's consolidation despite ethnic/national, social, and generational differences. All interviewees expressed commitment to the community and a willingness to sacrifice themselves for the protest participants. Some interviewees put the lives (survival) of other protest participants above their own lives or risked their own lives for the community with protective actions. The *community-feeling* played a crucial role in ensuring that people resisted and that the protests did not (partially) come to a standstill between September 2022 and December 2023.

The extent of resistance and *community-feeling* also seem to reinforce each other: The protests increase the feeling of connectedness, which in turn increases protest activity. The *community-feeling* is also evident as an empowering factor, as the protesters felt powerful due to

<sup>17</sup> This refers to the crash of flight PS752, which was shot down by two missiles of the IRGC in Tehran in January 2020 (PS752)Justice, n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> The 16th of Azar has historical significance in Iran, because on the so-called Day of Students (روز دانشجو), many students take to the streets to commemorate the murder of three students on December 7, 1953 (Ganjavi & Mojab, 2018). The Student's Day protests took place on the 16th of Azar as well as in the course of the *Zhin, Zhiyan, Azadi* protests.

<sup>19</sup> In Farsi, the slogan is: "Natarsid, natarsid, ma hame ba ham hastim". The rough translation in English is: "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, we are all together".

<sup>20</sup> Mohsen Shekari was imprisoned for his participation in the protest, declared guilty in a mock trial and then executed on the basis of a judgement of enmity with God. With the aim of destroying the sense of togetherness among the protesters, creating intimidation and thus ending the protests, the IR is implementing its threat to carry out death sentences more quickly (Amnesty International, 2022b).

their unity. The question of the reasons for the resistance cannot be answered without the feeling of belonging to a community.

Experiences of suffering and *community-feeling* were often discussed together. This indicates that the two phenomena are related and can influence each other: the experience of suffering is seemingly alleviated by the *community-feeling* which enables people to endure the suffering for longer. The shared experiences of suffering, in turn, strengthen *community-feeling*. The experience of suffering and injury in the collective can also strengthen the protesters and lead them to continue or even intensify their protest activities in some cases; resistance can also be understood as a way of dealing with injury.

Resistance is dependent not only on communitisation, but also on other factors such as vulnerability. We assume that *community-feeling* can influence the endurance of the protesters which in turn can influence whether the interviewees continue to participate in the protests. The ability to continue protesting despite the negative emotional and physical consequences manifests itself in an internalised attitude when community members feel powerful and capable of acting. This can lead to (increased) acts of resistance.

As indicated in the beginning, vulnerability can also develop a productive force in that the protesters draw motivation from the violation over the murder of strangers or people close to them to participate in the protests and thus exercise resistance. Vulnerability should, therefore, not be seen as something that renders people utterly incapable of acting. Gradual and situational changes in the vulnerability can alter the possibilities for action and thus moves along a continuum. We conclude that the ability to resist and vulnerability can also occur simultaneously. However, vulnerability can also turn into the opposite: psychological or physical injury can lead people to withdraw from protests. Here, again, the relevance of meaning-making is evident: the way in which the protest participants react to oppression and its influence on them is connected to the question of how they are able to integrate these experiences narratively into their own self.

Answering the second research question, vulnerability of the protestors could be one of the main reasons for ending individual protest. The interviewees reported individual experiences that led to a change in the type of protest or the individual ending the protest. People stop protesting when their experiences negatively outweighs the positive ones; adversely impacting them; simply put, when they are no longer capable of dealing with the injury. Vulnerability predominates in the interviews when the risks of injury are too significant for the community to endure or compensate for this suffering. At this point, it should be noted that although people often thought and acted collectively, the interviewees stopped protesting for individual reasons. However, it can be assumed that the interviewees did not thereby give up their affiliation with the protest community.

The *community-feeling* is not the only factor explaining continued participation in the protests. Other factors significantly impact protest participation but remained unaddressed in this research. The *community-feeling* can affect the experience of HARM and in this case is not primarily conducive to cope with injury. Furthermore, communitisation can be used as a coping strategy until people reach an individual point where they decide to no longer participate in the protests due to the experienced violation.

Although, in this research project, we only highlighted a few factors that describe the different qualities of the 2022–2023 protests, it must be emphasised that the protests in Iran have led to a change in their outcome. The change may not relate to the IR, but to the people who live there. Even if there is only little talk about the protests in public, they have not completely disappeared without a trace — they live on in the people in a different form. At least three out of four of the interviewees withdrew from the street protests in Iran at the time of the interviews. Still, each of the four, and presumably, many protesters in Iran embody the revolution and immortalise it in their own person, even if they no longer actively participate in the (street) protests.

From the beautiful body to the inspiring figure. From the body imprisoned in beauty to the body freed in the figure. This is not a transformation of the self into an ideal body, but the creation of a new figure of resistance each time and in every single body. While the body has been aroused by and takes inspiration from previous figures whose images it has seen in virtual space, it

creates a new figure and reciprocally inspires future figures. The chain of stimulation and inspiration. (L, 2022)

When my trust was suspended from the fragile thread of justice/  
And in the whole city they were chopping up my heart's lanterns/  
When they would blindfold my innocent eyes with the dark  
handkerchief of law/and from my anxious temples of desire  
fountain of blood would squirt out/When my life had become  
nothing, nothing but the tick-tock of a clock I discovered I must,  
must, must love, insanely. (Farrokhzad, 1974)

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### About the Authors

The authors are master's degree students in various social science programmes. Driven by a shared interest in violence in the context of social movements, they have collaboratively formed a research group. In addition to the authors, Jordi Bohnenkamp was also involved in the project. The research group spent over a year planning and conducting the research. This article, which was written following the research project, is based on the jointly developed results.