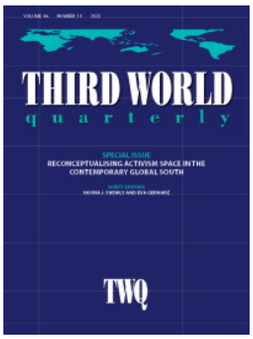

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Dancing *in-between*: interstitial feminist defiance in Iran's public and digital spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualises interstitial feminist defiance as a mode of activism that emerges between formal feminist mobilisations and everyday dissent. Drawing on a qualitative case study of the Ekbatan girls' viral dance in Tehran – a public, unsanctioned act of joy and resistance – we trace how embodied gestures circulate across urban and digital terrains, amplifying feminist struggle under authoritarian rule. These fleeting, often decentralised acts are neither apolitical nor isolated: they are rooted in a longer genealogy of feminist resistance in Iran and shaped by cumulative histories of protest, surveillance and creative defiance. We show how interstitial defiance operates through spatial improvisation, digital choreography and affective resonance – mobilising ephemeral visibility to forge collective identity, sustain dissent and unsettle dominant epistemologies of activism and resistance. We argue that these performances make three contributions: first, to digital activism, by showing how platform logics of virality, remix and risk are tactically navigated to contest gendered surveillance; second, to social movement theory, by bridging micro-gestures and macro trajectories of struggle; and third, to feminist studies, by foregrounding techno-embodied politics – where joy, care and vulnerability become activist resources. We close by proposing a methodological lens for studying hybrid, networked resistance in which corporeal expression and algorithmic circulation are analytically inseparable.

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Introduction

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a sharp break from the state-led socio-political reforms and women's rights efforts of the Pahlavi era,[1] replacing them with laws grounded in Islamic jurisprudence outlined in the new constitution. Among the most visible changes were strict dress codes, including compulsory veiling for women, and broader restrictions on their public presence and civil liberties. These rules – enforced by the morality police and embedded within Iran's gender apartheid regime (Afkhami 1999; True, Ahmadi, and Ross 2023) – deepened gender-based repression and sparked a range of feminist responses. Over time, activists and the civil society used both mass protests and symbolic acts – such as

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waving white headscarves, creating protest rap, blogging, graffiti, and other forms of art – to push back against compulsory hijab laws and the erasure of women from public spaces (Darvishi 2023; Hoodfar 2008; Karimi 2023; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Tohidi 2017; Vahabli 2024). Despite different methods and varied positionalities, these acts share a common aim: to challenge the gender norms imposed by the state, shift societal opinion, and expose the regime's unease about growing feminist dissent (Asadi Zeidabadi 2023).

Against this backdrop and amid heightened state control, a video surfaced on International Women's Day 2023 showing five adolescent girls dancing without headscarves in Tehran's Ekbatan neighbourhood to the song 'Calm Down' by Rema and Selena Gomez.[2] This simple yet powerful act of defiance filmed in public quickly went viral, drawing global attention to the struggle for bodily autonomy and women's rights in Iran (Tayebi 2023). Yet swift retaliation followed: the girls – soon known as the Ekbatan Girls – were detained, pressured into recording an apology video while veiled, and made to publicly denounce their actions as 'immoral' (Iran International Newsroom 2023).

The location of the video adds to its significance. Ekbatan, a planned residential district in western Tehran, is known for its human-centric urban design and vibrant cultural milieu that has, in recent years, become a key site of anti-regime expressions. Following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in police custody in September 2022, Ekbatan emerged as a symbolic node in the spatial choreography of dissent. The Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) protests ignited by Amini's death did not follow the familiar arc of reformist pleading; rather, they marked an immediate and collective rupture with the Islamic Republic's legitimacy – what Moore-Gilbert (2022) identified as a 'revolutionary moment'. As Bayat (2023) contends, this rupture was not merely a reactive outburst, but the culmination of a deeper struggle to reclaim life from an 'internal colonization', with women's embodied resistance challenging the regime's systemic control over everyday existence. In this context, even a brief dance in a residential courtyard acquires amplified political charge, defying the state's moral order while tapping into a broader repertoire of insurgent affects. It is this intensification of meaning – where space, body and political imaginaries converge – that transforms an ephemeral act into a generative node of resistance, extending across the surveillance-saturated streets of Tehran and into transnational circuits of solidarity. Far from incidental, the Ekbatan girls' dance is rooted in both place and political momentum, inviting not just recognition but continuation.

This paper contributes to growing scholarship on everyday public dissent (Roberts 2008) and the interplay between online and offline mobilisations (Milan 2015), with a focus on creative forms of resistance like dance (Shay 2008). Foundational works by Meftahi (2016) and Hatami (2022) have explored dance as a gendered form of resistance in Iran. However, there remains limited empirical research on how women strategically leverage dance, social media, and urban space as tools of resistance under authoritarian and theocratic settings. By offering a grounded account of one such moment, this paper examines how feminist resistance is tactically enacted through embodied gestures, digital circulation, and spatial improvisation under a regime where women's public self-expression is not only tightly controlled but also ideologically policed.

We conceptualise these acts as interstitial defiance – a creative, corporeal form of resistance situated between Bayat's (2007) notion of social non-movements and more established feminist mobilisations. The Ekbatan girls' act was neither an isolated event nor an entirely new phenomenon; rather, it was both inspired by and generative of parallel acts of defiance

– like unveiled singing, rooftop chanting and unauthorised stadium entries.[3] Though these interventions differ in form and context, they are interconnected through digital and urban public spaces, and collectively galvanise Iran's broader feminist and pro-democracy struggles. Consequently, this paper investigates how, under authoritarian constraints, (1) everyday gestures like dancing emerge as potent expressions of defiance; (2) public and digital spaces function as interlinked platforms for protest, visibility and risk; and (3) these ephemeral performances generate collective, affective and political resonances that extend beyond any singular moment of dissent.

Methodologically, this study adopts an in-depth multi-scalar, multi-model qualitative case study to examine the Ekbatan dance and its aftermath. It draws on a range of sources, including the original viral video, multimedia coverage, social media content (#dance4iran, #EkbatanGirls), and historical scholarship on feminist activism in Iran. This layered approach helps show how the Ekbatan dance became entangled in wider struggles over meaning, control and resistance. It also offers grounded insights into the complex interplay between physical and digital realms in authoritarian settings.

The analysis unfolds across four sections. The next section situates the Ekbatan girls' dance within the broader history of feminist struggle in Iran, engaging theories of spatial contestation, digital dissent and everyday resistance to introduce the concept of interstitial feminist defiance. Section three turns to Ekbatan's urban fabric and socio-political textures – while analysing the dance's visual and digital repertoires. Section four looks at how the video sparked transnational solidarity, examining the tensions between this global attention and state surveillance. Finally, the conclusion brings the threads together, reflecting on the transformative potential of bodily resistance and digital platforms in shaping new forms of feminist defiance under authoritarian rule.

Women's struggle for public and digital spaces

Understanding the Ekbatan dance as an act of defiance requires situating it within Iran's persistent, if uneven, history of feminist struggle against patriarchal rule since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This phase of resistance began with landmark moments such as the 8 March 1979 protests in Tehran, when tens of thousands of women – accustomed to greater freedoms under the Pahlavi monarchy – protested the newly imposed compulsory hijab. Spanning six days, the protests were met with violence and intimidation by Islamist forces seeking to consolidate control. In the years that followed, both formal organisations, such as the Women's Society (Jamiyat-e Zanan), and more covert informal networks of activists continued to advance feminist causes, despite growing restrictions (Mohammadi 2013). These early mobilisations set the stage for the diverse range of feminist tactics that would emerge in the later decades.

Organised campaigns like One Million Signatures[4] sought legal and policy change, while more decentralised efforts – such as My Stealthy Freedom[5] – focused on bodily autonomy and symbolic acts of resistance, especially against compulsory hijab laws (Hoodfar 2008; Tohidi 2017). Despite their different approaches, these movements share a common goal: challenging state-imposed gender norms and demanding rights in both public and private spheres. Although these efforts have not brought about major legal reforms, they have significantly shaped public opinion. Many women have become more confident in reclaiming public space, while the authorities have responded with a mix of harsh crackdown and

occasional concessions – such as temporarily easing dress code enforcement during politically sensitive periods, like the days leading up to state-run elections – signalling their anxiety over accumulating feminist dissent.

Central to these acts of dissent is the strategic use of urban space as women assert agency through their physical presence in public and semi-public settings, and disrupting state control over visibility, access and movement. They claim overlooked areas such as courtyards, balconies and rooftops – often escaping direct surveillance and academic attention (Alami Fariman and Hakiminejad 2024; Dadpour 2024). More than symbolic, these embodied actions actively reshape public space and challenge efforts to render women invisible.

One example of this spatial struggle is the long-standing ban on women entering sports stadiums. Since the 1980s, the Islamic Republic has used vague excuses such as *public morality* to bar women from these spaces. Despite persistent domestic campaigning and international pressure, including from Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), only limited and tightly controlled exceptions have been granted. The 2019 case of Sahar Khodayari, known as the Blue Girl, who died by self-immolation after facing legal repercussions for attempting to attend a football match, drew international outrage (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2019).

Her death also triggered strong national reactions. Iranian football fans expressed shock and anger, with some calling for a boycott of matches in protest. Prominent footballers urged the public to stop attending games altogether. On social media, users mobilised under the hashtag #BanIRSportsFederations, calling for Iran's exclusion from global sporting events (Gerken 2019). In response, government officials issued conflicting statements – while some downplayed her legal case, others publicly questioned her mental health, and her family was later told by the authorities not to speak to the media. These reactions highlight the regime's defensive posture and the broader discomfort with growing public dissent, especially when such dissent reaches emotionally charged and highly visible platforms.

This dynamic reflects a broader reality: authoritarian governance profoundly shapes both the scope and form of feminist resistance in public spaces. Historically, public spaces have served as crucial platforms for dissent, protest and nonconformity, enabling marginalised groups to assert their presence and challenge dominant norms (Springer 2011). More than physical sites, public spaces are arenas where power is negotiated, reshaped and contested. By dictating visibility, access and acceptable behaviour, state regulation of public space actively produces social and political inequalities. While government regulations often reinforce existing hierarchies, when defied, these spaces become sites of resistance that subvert dominant power structures (Brown and Gershon 2017). The intersectionality of identities further intensifies these struggles, allowing individuals to confront overlapping inequalities. This diversity fosters collective activism, generating new meanings and practices even within restrictive environments. Public space not only reflects but also disrupts prevailing power relations. It serves as a key arena for contesting cultural and legal rights – especially for those on society's margins. In repressive contexts, where open protest entails high risk, resistance often shifts from mass mobilisations to dispersed, everyday acts that may seem minor, yet carry deep political significance. These strategies evade immediate retaliation while sustaining dissent through repetition, symbolism and embodied defiance.

Yet, as Bayat (2007) argues, Western-centric theories of social movements – focused on formal organisation and visible leadership – often miss the adaptive, everyday nature of activism under repressive conditions. In such contexts, where heavily policed, dissent often

shifts to less visible, improvised forms. Rather than disappearing, it reconfigures the use of space and visibility itself (Dadpour 2024). Authoritarian regimes tightly manage public presence – deciding not only who may appear, but how, and under what conditions. In response, activists reclaim overlooked spaces to disrupt this control, using brief, embodied acts to assert political presence. These micro-interventions show how feminist resistance innovates under constraint, challenging dominant norms without relying on formal structures or mass mobilisation.

In a parallel fashion, digital platforms have emerged as vital conduits for organising and amplifying resistance. Just as marginalised physical spaces are repurposed into arenas of protest, social media platforms – from X (formerly Twitter) to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube – facilitate leaderless assemblies and transnational solidarity (Brym et al. 2014; Clarke and Kocak 2020; Fakhry, Tarabasz, and Selakovic 2023; Shewly and Gerharz 2021). In Iran, these platforms have similarly catalysed viral dissent while bridging geographies and creating novel opportunities for activism under a repressive regime. Basmechi, Barnes, and Heydari (2022) reveal that hashtag movements dismantle isolation by enabling activism and advocacy across digital networks. Yet the same technologies are increasingly appropriated by authoritarian regimes not only to surveil and punish dissent but to consolidate legitimacy through narrative control, infrastructural capture and legal restriction (Rudnik 2024). This duality encapsulates the inherent tensions of navigating an authoritarian digital sphere, mirroring the complexities observed in physical spaces.

Digital technologies have profoundly reshaped the feminist landscape in Iran, enabling activists to partially circumvent state surveillance and censorship while building informal networks (Mehan 2024; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). One notable example is My Stealthy Freedom online campaign, which illustrates how decentralised networks can effectively circulate information and solidarity across borders (Stewart and Schultze 2019). In this context, social media functions not merely as a space for expression but also as a terrain of continuous negotiation – shaped by the creativity of users and the constraints of authoritarian control. The Iranian state's stringent internet censorship – characterised by platform bans, content filtering and frequent shutdowns – has compelled activists to rely on VPNs, anonymising browsers, encrypted messaging apps and diaspora-led digital campaigns to sustain momentum. Tactics such as coded language, visual metaphors and ephemeral accounts have become critical tools for evading detection. Even amidst severe crackdowns, activists have adapted by mobilising supporters online, documenting human rights abuses and fostering international solidarity (Conduit 2025; Kermani 2025; Rezai 2024). Despite these formidable barriers, their persistence exemplifies a continuum of feminist strategies that stretches from the street protests of 1979 to contemporary, networked forms of dissent – including public dance, unveiled singing and other hybrid physical–digital acts of resistance.

Contemporary networked online and offline protest strategies and the spaces in which they unfold have shifted significantly from conventional understandings of social movements. Historically, social movements have been conceptualised as formal entities with clear leadership structures, defined memberships and explicit organisational hierarchies. However, in the face of authoritarian repression or rapidly changing socio-political conditions, such conventional definitions often fail to capture the fluidity, spontaneity and decentralised modes of activism that increasingly characterise collective resistance. Scholars have explored these non-traditional forms using concepts such as social non-movements, which highlight how dispersed, everyday acts of defiance can accumulate substantial political

impact without taking the shape of a formalised organisation. Under such frameworks, passive or uncoordinated acts of resistance – what Bayat refers to as quiet encroachment – can collectively challenge authoritarian regimes, especially in contexts where overt protest is dangerous. Yet these everyday acts do not preclude higher-risk, spontaneous activism emerging from loosely networked actors. Thus, while social non-movements stress the micro acts that build into broader waves of protest, the debate remains open on how to analytically distinguish them from more conventional or more explicitly feminist mobilisations.

Despite the usefulness of Bayat's concept, critics argue that designating certain forms of activism as non-movements can downplay the complexity of existing political struggles. Hoodfar (2008), for instance, asserts that by prioritising formal leadership, identifiable memberships and structured organisations, traditional social movement theory risks reinforcing authoritarian narratives. Iranian authorities routinely deny any genuine women's movement, casting feminist resistance as fractured, incoherent and politically void. Consequently, labelling informal or decentralised forms of activism as non-movements may inadvertently support the regime's stance by suggesting that Iranian women's advocacy lacks cohesion or legitimacy. Hoodfar's (2008) critique calls for a broader view that recognises long-standing feminist demands, historically rooted organisational infrastructures, and creative strategies of dissent. Instead of reducing these acts to a less-than-movement, it is crucial to examine how these adaptive, flexible forms of resistance operate effectively, particularly under conditions of intense surveillance, censorship and political risk.

In this context, the Ekbatan girls' dance, despite not being a part of a formally structured organisation, resonated powerfully with the broader struggle for women's rights in Iran. While such an example fits some criteria of non-movement due to its informal and grassroots nature, we echo Hoodfar's (2008) cautions against reducing the broader Iranian women's movement and advocacy to an amorphous, disorganised entity. The Ekbatan girls' dance was not isolated; it connected with a deep history of feminist demands that have long existed in Iran – albeit often operating beneath the radar to evade repression. Understanding this single incident in isolation risks overlooking the significance of the networked and historically layered nature of women's activism, highlighting the limitations of any simplistic non-movement label. As such, social movements need to be grasped as socio-political processes – shaped through uneven temporalities, embedded in shifting relations with institutions, and entangled with the presence and pressures of other co-existing struggles (Shewly and Gerharz 2023).

Conceptualising interstitial feminist defiance

To address the above-mentioned conceptual tensions, we introduce *interstitial feminist defiance* – a framework that captures the hybrid forms of activism that arise between formal mobilisations and everyday resistance. This concept foregrounds actions that may appear mundane in less restrictive settings – dancing in a public square, burning a headscarf, or engaging in artistic performances. Yet in Iran, these acts are punishable forms of disobedience. Interstitial defiance occupies a fluid, networked space that bridges the spontaneity often described in social non-movements with the historical continuity, organisational roots, and explicit feminist demands evident in more structured campaigns. It underscores how collective creativity – expressed through acts that might initially seem individual or

scattered – coalesces into a broader movement that seeks to reclaim public spaces, challenge gender norms and spark collective consciousness.

These dynamics are not unique to Iran but reflect broader patterns of feminist activism under conditions of severe repression and constrained political space. For example, Akbari, Stallone, and Zulver (2025) document in their account of Afghan women's resistance under Taliban rule – acts such as recording themselves singing beneath burqas and sharing the videos online – how feminist defiance persists – at times intensifies – under extreme duress. These situated acts – whether in Tehran courtyards or Kabul classrooms – underscore the need for an analytic framework that can attend to the texture, temporality and relationality of such feminist defiance. Interstitial feminist defiance within this wider geography of repression and resilience not only broadens our conceptual horizon but also resists the flattening pull of universalisation. What emerges instead is a shared topology of struggle, in which feminist resistance is continually reconfigured through creative, embodied, and often quiet forms of refusal.

Interstitial defiance thus represents a conceptual middle ground, a politics of *in-between*, integrating elements of conventional social movements and social non-movements, and characterised by:

- Spontaneous, political, and networked defiance

Acts of resistance emerge organically yet are politically astute and connected through informal networks – though lacking a formal hierarchy, they are neither random nor apolitical.

- Public and digital spaces as conduits

Urban locales and online platforms function as amplifiers of these embodied acts. Visibility, virality and iterative creativity in tactics enable each act to resonate beyond its immediate context.

- Cumulative and improvisational expansion

While a single dance or protest sign might appear fleeting, the broader movement grows through successive, adaptive waves of action. Each episode both builds on and inspires others, forging a collective tapestry of dissent.

By bridging everyday ordinary actions with explicit political objectives in networked space, interstitial feminist defiance calls attention to how individual and small-group tactics can spark broad solidarities, even in highly repressive environments. It demonstrates how women transform physical and virtual spaces into arenas of protest, combining mundane practices with potent acts of subversion.

At its core, interstitial feminist defiance challenges both the authoritarian policing of gender norms and narrow, institutionalised definitions of activism. In contexts like Iran, women reclaim their bodies and environments – whether a courtyard or a social media feed – as sites of political agency. These acts are not isolated or apolitical; they generate shared meaning, reinforce collective identity, and nourish a resilient protest ecology. They exemplify how a seemingly spontaneous gesture can tap into this ecology, transforming a localised act into a node of feminist resistance. By centring embodied action, such as dancing, this mode of defiance reveals how intimate gestures become woven into broader political struggles.

The digital and physical realms, far from separate, function as interconnected terrains of dissent – each amplifying the other and sustaining feminist activism under conditions of surveillance and repression.

The Ekbatan girls' public dance exemplifies this in-between mode of resistance, one that occupies the interstitial spaces between large-scale mobilisations and more localised everyday acts of defiance. Although seemingly spontaneous and uncoordinated, this dance is connected to earlier feminist struggles in Iran, including the WLF protest during 2022–2023. Positioned within this broader context, it illustrates how small interventions not only emerge from larger protest waves but also feed into them, renewing their energy and visibility. This interstitial quality is crucial: it shows that feminist resistance in Iran does not simply oscillate between major uprisings and quiet endurance. Instead, it finds forceful expression in creative, public acts that bridge local experiences with global feminist currents.

The WLF protests expanded the space of what felt possible, even if temporarily. They opened room for experimentation – encouraging people to test new forms of dissent despite the risks. They also made visible the layered pressures Iranian women face: not only confronting state power, but also pushing back against entrenched cultural norms around bodily behaviour and gender roles. Moreover, the WLF protests attracted substantial domestic and international attention, creating a moment of heightened visibility for Iranian women's struggles. This visibility helped shift the frame: smaller acts of defiance, like the Ekbatan dance, were more likely to be recognised as political and meaningful. The global audience, already attuned to the narrative of feminist resistance in Iran, was prepared to amplify these gestures, connecting this dance with broader demands for autonomy and justice.

This transnational resonance extended the impact of the Ekbatan dance beyond its immediate setting. Enabled by digital platforms, the act became part of a broader cycle of protest – where each gesture builds on prior momentum and, in turn, generates new forms of action. Crucially, the symbolic weight of any single act depends not only on the bravery of its performers but also on the political atmosphere shaped by preceding mobilisations. In the aftermath of mass protests like WLF, authoritarian regimes grow especially sensitive to even modest expressions of dissent, fearing they could reignite collective unrest. As such, the Ekbatan girls' dance triggered a dual response: it inspired widespread solidarity while also prompting heightened surveillance and repression. This paradox underscores the capacity of interstitial feminist defiance to both evade and provoke power, to survive in precarious openings while exposing the state's vulnerabilities.

The Ekbatan dance and its spatial strategy

Spatial politics of Ekbatan

The Ekbatan girls' dance acquires its subversive charge through its emplacement – within a spatial milieu that mediates visibility, vulnerability and collective expression. Ekbatan, a planned residential complex in western Tehran with over 200,000 residents, is known for its modernist design, green spaces and vibrant cultural life. Built in the late 1970s to house middle-income professionals, the neighbourhood fosters a strong sense of community shaped by amenities like parks, schools and courtyards (Figure 1). Its lush parks and popular shopping centres have earned it the moniker of 'Tehran's lungs', and many city-dwellers flock to Ekbatan to partake in its fresh air (Ekbatan Online 2023). Pedestrian pathways, courtyards

Figure 1. Satellite view of Ekbatan Town, Phase One, located in western Tehran, Iran (35.7107°N, 51.3060°E).
Source: Google. Imagery © 2025 Maxar Technologies.

and public squares are prominent features, fostering a vibrant hub for social gatherings and cultural events. As Sedighi (2018) details, the entire district was conceived as a high-density but amenity-rich megastructure, reflecting Iran's technocratic drive to house middle-income civil servants under the Shah's modernisation policies. In practice, such integrated design helped foster a distinct communal ethos among residents, with many perceiving Ekbatan as more socially cohesive and resource-rich than neighbourhoods lacking similar infrastructural support (Sedighi 2018). Ekbatan's inhabitants are diverse, featuring young families alongside more affluent older households, creating a pluralistic community. The demographic includes a significant number of students and early career professionals, contributing to its reputation as a hub for modern Iranian cultural life.

This urban form – neither fully public nor entirely private – creates pockets of relative openness that can be tactically used for protest. The semi-collective environments offer a degree of insulation from heavy state surveillance that make them an ideal site for subtle yet symbolically potent acts of defiance. Ekbatan also has a history of anti-regime activism. For over three decades, residents of Ekbatan have organised one of Tehran's largest Charshanbe Suri bonfire night festivals in late March. This festival has been a site of conflict between the police, Basij militia of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),[6] and the festival participants. The authorities consider the festival a pagan tradition and often crack down on the festivities, which include music, dancing and flouting hijab rules. Ekbatan has also been one of the epicentres of the WLF movement. Despite the arrests and intensified security, residents continued with ongoing creative resistance like dancing and chanting slogans at night. This interplay among spatial design, legacy of dissent, and everyday dynamics set the stage for a bold public challenge to gendered control.

The short viral video features five adolescent girls in casual, Western-style clothing, dancing to the song 'Calm Down' by Rema and Selena Gomez in the courtyard of Block 13 within Ekbatan neighbourhood. On the surface, the video appears simple: a playful

choreography, youthful energy, and a soundtrack popular among global youth. Yet in Iran's political context, every element of the video – choice of attire, uncovered hair, the song and public bodily movement – displays direct disobedience of the regime's moral codes punishable by the country's Islamic laws. By choosing a secluded semi-public courtyard, the girls struck a careful balance: visible enough to make a statement, yet slightly removed from high-traffic areas to reduce immediate risk. Their defiance was not reckless; it was deliberate and spatially calculated, turning a familiar communal space into a stage for feminist protest.

Choreographies of defiance

A close visual reading of the video, adopting a frame-by-frame analysis in line with Rose's (2022) visual methodology, reveals a choreography of confidence and cohesion. The girls move in synchrony – hip swings, precise steps, expressive gestures – without touching, yet clearly attuned to one another, demonstrating a collective spirit of bodily agency. These small details, like a subtle arch of the back, flip of the hair or quick flourish of arms, all matter, as they all signal joy and agency. The girl who tosses her hair or bends closer to a friend, smiling directly at the lens, is not merely engaging in a casual flourish but interrupts expectations of female modesty and containment. Here, the shared act of 'booty-shaking' stands out as a playful yet assertive gesture. It reclaims the body as a source of empowerment, rather than a site of regulation. When the dancers shake their hips or whip their hair, they openly enjoy and display their physicality – defying any norms that would insist on making women's movements discreet or contained. By manifesting confidence, unity and a playful sense of freedom in front of a camera that never moves, the dancers subvert the norm, calling attention to the courtyard as a charged stage of collective assertion and shared empowerment.

The camera's placement on the floor, remaining completely still throughout the performance, offers a deliberate framing that both magnifies the dancers' bodily agency and anchors the viewer's gaze at ground level. The static, low-placed camera doesn't distract or impose a more conventional, expert gaze from above. The lack of camera movement removes any external framing or hierarchy, allowing the girls' choreography to speak for itself. Each gesture, step, and moment becomes more pronounced, allowing the viewer to register the subtleties of the dancers' movements as well as the interplay of bodies against the surrounding environment. This framing underscores the significance of the courtyard as a stage: it becomes simultaneously ordinary – suggestive of daily life – and extraordinary – a site of symbolic and possibly radical performance. In this setting, public and private blend: what could be deemed private expressions of female bodily confidence now become a public spectacle, all while remaining anchored in a communal, everyday setting. The girls are not just dancing – they are making a claim to space, visibility and freedom.

The Ekbatan girls' dance symbolically intruded upon what the state seeks to control as moral territory within ostensibly regulated public environments. This echoes Meftahi's (2016) argument that dance in Iran, often confined to private homes or underground parties, becomes a powerful form of gendered protest when openly displayed. By harnessing the courtyard as a stage, the girls enacted small but significant transgressions – as Shay (2008) describes – directly challenging the rigid moral codes of the Islamic Republic. Their choreography – relaxed, synchronised, and joyful – visually countered the stifling seriousness of state surveillance, asserting a collective bodily autonomy that defies imposed norms of behaviour and dress.

The ripple effect of dissent

The Ekbatan dance swiftly sparked a surge of solidarity across social media, exemplifying interstitial feminist defiance bridging everyday life and broader feminist movements. Online platforms – particularly X, Instagram and TikTok – served as conduits for a viral wave of support that linked loosely connected individuals through shared hashtags and visual motifs. Notably, the Ekbatan X account, an informal social media outlet with around 40,000 followers documenting neighbourhood events, was among the first to share the video of the girls' dance. Here, digital and urban spaces did not operate in parallel but co-constituted a politicised terrain of dissent – where bodily gestures in courtyards and their viral circulation online were mutually amplifying.

Between March and April 2023, the hashtag #dance4iran received millions of views on social media, with many solidarity videos exceeding 100,000 views on various digital platforms. In the days that followed, countless Iranians – students, young professionals, parents and elders – took to social media to share clips of themselves dancing to the same song across different locations and settings. Some danced in courtyards or balconies, while others performed in the middle of a quiet street or remote outdoor spots, collectively echoing the message of bodily autonomy, and resisting state-sanctioned moral codes. This groundswell of national support illustrated how a single, ostensibly isolated act of defiance could catalyse a nationwide wave of choreography-based solidarity, bridging generational and class divides.

Meanwhile, in Tehran's working-class neighbourhoods, some people moved indoors to dance in their living room or closed backyard, reminding us how spatial constraints and expectations can shape the visibility and form of participation. Many used masks and technology to hide or blur their faces in fear of repercussions. A university student from southern Tehran described how her fear of being seen forced her to move the dance indoors, yet she still experienced it as an act of protest: 'I knew I couldn't do it on the street, but dancing in my friend's living room felt like we were shouting'. Digital space enabled participation by those who couldn't physically gather, including those from more conservative areas – or those at greater risk, such as ethnic minorities. A middle-aged woman from Mashhad, a religious conservative city in north-eastern Iran, recounted: 'I haven't danced in public since I was a child. Seeing these girls gave me courage. I turned off the lights in my apartment and danced with my daughter in front of the window. Maybe someone saw us'.

In a striking act of solidarity, several Iranian Baluch girls and women, dressed in traditional embroidered clothing, posted videos of themselves dancing to the same song but with notable adaptations. They recorded indoors, blurred their faces and bodies, and carefully framed the shots to avoid including any identifying features – not just of themselves, but of their surroundings. No distinctive décor, objects, or spatial cues appeared in the background, reflecting a heightened awareness of surveillance. These choices speak to both cultural and security concerns, as Baluch women face intensified repression due to ethnic marginalisation, conservative social expectations and targeted state monitoring (Amnesty International 2024). By transforming private, anonymous spaces into stages of political expression, these women navigated the constraints of visibility with care. 'We cannot risk showing our faces, but our bodies will still speak', one caption read on Instagram, encapsulating the delicate balance between defiance and self-preservation. Even anonymised, these videos asserted presence, defiance and solidarity – quiet, but unmistakably political.

Videos circulating on social media reveal the diverse demographic participation in the dance movement. Elderly women, schoolgirls, men in work attire, and entire families danced in defiance, embodying a cross-generational and cross-class solidarity. A man in his early 50s, from central Iran, expressed this sentiment clearly: 'I never thought I would dance as a form of protest, but when I saw the videos, I realised this wasn't just about women – it was about all of us fighting for dignity'. These performances unfolded across rooftops, metro stations, public parks, streets and schools – each adapted to its own spatial and cultural reality. One striking example comes from a group of women in hijab, who recorded themselves dancing in a private backyard in a small southern town. Sharing the video online, they explained 'We knew we couldn't do this in public, but in our own way, we wanted to show the world that we are part of this'.

The rapid dissemination of dance videos underscores how digital platforms enable widely dispersed individuals to co-produce collective meaning. Each post – whether from a mother in Mashhad, young professionals in Rasht, or a man in central Iran – adds a layer of cultural and socio-cultural specificity, weaving a nationwide chorus of feminist resistance. The spread across class and ethnic lines illustrates a form of intersectional protest through adapted visibility: while some participants could afford greater public exposure, others engaged in more discreet yet equally crucial acts of defiance. The intimate, clandestine performances of Baluch girls and women, for example, were not merely examples of quiet encroachment or private dissent – they were intentional, relational and affectively charged contributions to a networked protest ecology. Their distributed and partial nature reinforced its reach and durability, forming a dynamic constellation of feminist defiance across Iran's social landscape.

Simultaneously, the absence of formal coordination does not imply apoliticism. Rather, as Hoodfar (2008) argues, loosely networked acts reflect broader feminist aspirations and historical struggles for women's rights in Iran. This connective mobilisation blurred the lines between centre and periphery, allowing people without physical proximity – or access to conventional protest platforms – to participate meaningfully through shared digital and embodied practices. Digital technologies have become critical infrastructures for democratic engagement, enabling citizens to enact agency, sustain solidarity networks and resist authoritarian constraints, while simultaneously reproducing existing inequalities in access, risk and visibility (Navumau, Gustafsson, and Matveieva 2025). Although the Ekbatan girls acted from a comparatively less conservative, middle-class setting, their defiance resonated widely, demonstrating how interstitial feminist resistance circulates, adapts and gains force across uneven geographies and differentiated lived conditions.

Global solidarity

Almost immediately, the Ekbatan dance transcended national borders. The hashtags #dance4iran and #EkbatanGirls became rallying points for global solidarity, especially among Iranian diaspora communities. By April 2023, over 139,000 posts on X alone featured #dance4iran, accompanied by a surge of videos on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube of people around the world replicating the girls' choreography. These videos – bodies in motion across distant geographies – forged affective kinship across borders. The emergent visual collage of solidarity – people dancing in kitchens in Toronto, squares in Berlin, or parks in Washington, DC – magnified the initial act. The Iranian diaspora in particular formed a linchpin, leveraging their transnational networks to mobilise media attention and sponsor group public

performances that echoed the Ekbatan choreography – from Paris to Los Angeles – extending the reach and impact of the original act.

Celebrity endorsements further propelled the girls into mainstream visibility. Selena Gomez, whose collaboration with Rema produced the song 'Calm Down', posted her support on Instagram to over 400 million followers. Rema also voiced admiration. By explicitly aligning with the girls' protest, these artists lent additional legitimacy and urgency to their message, showcasing how global pop culture can intersect with local resistance. While such celebrity gestures risk superficial clicktivism, they also expand the audience, bringing attention from those who might otherwise overlook Iran's feminist struggles (Couldry and Markham 2007). In this case, celebrity support amplified the Ekbatan girls' defiance, helping transform a fleeting local protest into a symbol of broader resistance to gendered repression.

Iranian diaspora communities in cities such as Paris, Basel, Los Angeles, Toronto and Berlin did more than amplify the Ekbatan girls' protest – they reterritorialised it. By staging collective performances in public squares, they relocated a gesture born in a semi-private Tehran courtyard into the civic spaces of liberal democracies, transforming it into a visible demand for international recognition, accountability and gender justice. These performances were not simply acts of support but acts of *political translation* – reframing a precarious, high-risk defiance into a transnational claim on shared feminist futures. Drawing on diasporic infrastructures and histories of exile, these communities reconfigured the protest through choreographed presence, not as spectators, but as political agents who understand the stakes of visibility differently. In doing so, they navigated the asymmetries of privilege, geography and safety – not to erase the risk from which the act emerged, but to extend its resonance beyond the borders of the state that sought to contain it.

The solidarity soon became a popular trend at global scales. The domestic struggles of Iranian women were reframed through a transnational feminist lens, gaining traction within international human rights discourses. The Ekbatan protest resonated globally because it offered a clear, emotionally legible frame – young girls dancing, then punished. It translated effectively across contexts (Vahabli 2025). The viral circulation of the video enabled individuals with no direct ties to Iran to participate affectively and politically. One widely shared TikTok video showed a European grandmother filming her teenage grandson dancing in a hospital corridor while waiting for medical attention. The caption read 'My grandson did not even know where Iran was. Today he heard the story of #Ekbatangirls from his doctor and decided to show his support'. In such moments, solidarity emerges not through shared identity or geography, but through the ethical and emotional force of the act itself.

A dancer couple in Washington, DC, posted a TikTok video under the hashtag #Dance4Iran, captioned 'Our hearts are with the women in Iran who got arrested for doing exactly this. Dance for Iran ❤□ DC'. Within days, the video reached over one million views, showcasing how embodied cultural expression traverses political boundaries more fluidly than formal diplomacy. Unlike state-sponsored advocacy – often dismissed as political interference – these grassroots acts of solidarity, anchored in embodied movement rather than rhetoric, evade geopolitical framings and invite emotional resonance. These affective politics constitute affective publics: loosely networked collectives drawn together through shared feelings and political commitments (Papacharissi 2015).

This networked solidarity unfolded along interlinked but distinct pathways. First, diaspora communities mobilised transnational networks to stage large-scale performances, exert

media pressure and create visible counter-narratives. Second, global feminist and human rights movements recognised the broader significance of the Ekbatan girls' dance, drawing parallels to other struggles over bodily autonomy. Third, everyday digital users and cultural producers contributed affectively (Hemmings 2012), as individuals recreated the dance, produced artistic tributes, and shared messages of support across social media platforms. These expressions did not rely on institutional leadership or formal alliances; they coalesced through the choreography of feeling, memory and shared risk.

An analysis of 204 posts on X, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok from the peak protest period reveals three dominant themes:

1. Advocacy for women's rights: many posts explicitly linked the dance to resistance against compulsory hijab and broader gender-based repression in Iran.
2. Solidarity through embodied imitation: users around the world replicated the choreography, using their own bodies to signal alignment and care.
3. Critique of state repression: numerous posts condemned the responses of authorities in Iran, framing them as emblematic of systemic violations of expression and autonomy. We will explain these responses in the following paragraphs.

These themes underscore how digital platforms not only extend the spatial reach of protest, but also consolidate its political meaning through repetition, circulation and re-contextualisation. Viral performances from Latin America, Europe and South Asia constituted situated adaptation aligning the Ekbatan girls' dance with other feminist and anti-authoritarian struggles. This translatability shows that political resistance is not confined to its original context but gains traction through affective resonance and tactical circulation. The diversity of responses also challenged state narratives that cast Iranian protests as foreign instigated. Instead, what emerged was a global, grassroots alliance – rooted not in intervention, but in shared refusal, empathy and feminist commitment.

While digital platforms enabled global advocacy, they also introduced new vulnerabilities. In authoritarian contexts like Iran, visibility is always ambivalent: it empowers, but it also exposes. In the Ekbatan case, the same viral circulation that generated widespread solidarity also facilitated the swift identification of the girls. Within days, Iranian authorities tracked them down, detained them, and broadcast a forced apology video on state media (Iran International Newsroom 2023). This outcome demonstrates the paradox of viral protest: its power lies in its reach, but that reach can also become a conduit for surveillance, punishment and state control. Visibility, in this context, is not inherently liberatory – it must be navigated with acute awareness of its risks.

By physically detaining the girls and compelling their public recantation, the state enacted its sovereign power to govern bodies and regulate conduct – reasserting control through a spectacle of enforced modesty and repentance. Yet this display of biopolitical dominance backfired. It provoked widespread outrage and generated further waves of digital and physical protest.

As news of the girls' detention spread, supporters rapidly mobilised connective affordances of social media – speed, wide reach and transnational circulation – to amplify their case. Across platforms, users shared images, messages and dance videos in defiance, sustaining public attention. The public reaction to the girls' detention activated not only digital amplification, but a deeper struggle over the terms of visibility and recognition. The state's

forced apology video constituted a public performance not of mutual acknowledgement, but of coerced submission – a perverse inversion of what public presence might otherwise mean. In response, global users reclaimed the digital sphere as a counter-public – one that refused the state's framing and instead reaffirmed the girls' act as dignified, courageous and politically meaningful. What was at stake was not just freedom of expression, but the right to appear as a political subject without being criminalised for one's body or joy. The circulation of new dance videos thus became more than solidarity – it was a reassertion of reciprocity in the face of its violation.

In illustrating the interstitial nature of defiance, the state's reaction revealed what it sought to deny: that even brief, decentralised acts can rupture dominant regimes of control. These gestures may lack formal organisation, but their political potency lies in their capacity to reconfigure the boundaries of what is sayable, visible and possible. The regime's harsh response – intended to restore order – only confirmed the volatility of such liminal spaces. What appeared as a minor act became a flashpoint, not because of its scale, but because of its form: embodied, collective, affectively charged and publicly shared. In attempting to suppress it, the state inadvertently exposed its own fear of joy as dissent, and of bodies that refuse to obey.

Conclusion

The Ekbatan girls' dance exemplifies the evolving nature of feminist resistance in authoritarian contexts, offering a paradigmatic articulation of interstitial feminist defiance – a situated, improvisational and networked form of resistance that moves between bodily autonomy and digital virality, everyday gestures and historical feminist trajectories. It demonstrates how seemingly spontaneous acts, when amplified through physical and digital networks, become powerful expressions of collective dissent. This study bridges the gap between everyday dissent and more formalised social movements. By operating in the in-between spaces where traditional typologies blur, these acts not only contest state control over women's bodies and public spaces but also redefine the contours of political engagement in an era dominated by surveillance and repression. Through this lens, we reconceptualise activism in authoritarian contexts as a continuum of layered strategies – unfolding across public, semi-public and digital spaces – rather than a binary between formal movements and atomised dissent.

Interstitial feminist defiance challenges both the logics of state repression and the boundaries of scholarly categorisation. It emerges in transitional spaces – spatially (courtyards, balconies, masked screens), socially (among youth, women, minorities), and symbolically (between private expression and public performance). These acts are ephemeral yet affectively dense; spontaneous yet networked; locally grounded yet globally resonant. Through distributed performativity, protest resides not only in what is danced or said, but in how it is seen, shared and iteratively re-performed across dispersed networks. The Ekbatan girls' choreography thus becomes a rhizomatic feminist act – branching across spaces and identities, fostering affective publics and recursive solidarities. As embodied dissent circulates digitally, it subverts imposed norms on gender, space and propriety, while reclaiming agency through joy, rhythm and collective movement.

At the same time, the Ekbatan girls' dance underscores how resistance emerges not just between spaces but also between epistemic regimes – challenging dominant definitions of

activism, legitimacy and authority. The framework of interstitial feminist defiance arises within these tensions, drawing on feminist traditions that treat theorising as intervention, not merely interpretation. As debates on the uneasy location of scholar-activism remind us (Philipson Garcia et al. 2025), occupying the borderlands of research and resistance is not a contradiction but a condition – one that demands methodological attunement, political care and a refusal of clean resolutions.

Yet this defiance is fraught with paradox. As the Ekbatan case shows, virality simultaneously empowers and endangers; it opens spaces for global solidarity even as it exposes individuals to intensified surveillance and punishment. Visibility, here, is a double-edged choreography – liberatory and lethal. Interstitial feminist acts thus operate within a contested situation of exposure, where affective resonance is harnessed with acute awareness of precarity. These dilemmas underscore the relational and tactical intelligence of feminist resistance under authoritarianism – a refusal to be totalised, a capacity to inhabit contradiction.

Looking ahead, future research should further explore how interstitial acts of defiance can be systematically linked to broader transformative processes. Investigations into other creative protest forms, as well as comparative studies across different authoritarian contexts, will deepen our understanding of how in-between dissent evolves and reshapes political landscapes. Ultimately, the insights from this study not only enrich scholarly debates on feminist resistance but also offer a roadmap for harnessing the power of creative expression in the pursuit of social justice.

While Iran's state apparatus continues to enforce rigid controls over women's bodies and public space, protests like this expose the fragility of such authoritarian constraints. In doing so, they reveal how authoritarian power is not only resisted through visible rupture, but undone through the slow, disobedient labour of those who refuse erasure – and how feminist defiance, especially when interstitial, does not merely challenge the state, but also confronts the epistemic order that renders such defiance illegible.

Author contributions statements

Rana Dadpour: conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. **Hosna J. Shewly:** conceptualisation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics

All data used in this study were derived from publicly available sources and used under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License [CC BY 4.0]. To ensure the safety and privacy of individuals, identifying details have been anonymised, and no personally identifiable data were collected.

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Notes

1. The Pahlavi era (1925–1979) was marked by state-led modernisation and secularisation, culminating in the White Revolution of 1962 under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. This reform programme introduced economic and social initiatives, including land redistribution, industrial expansion and, crucially, legislation aimed at empowering women in both private and public spheres. Women gained the right to vote, access to education, and greater professional opportunities, signalling a shift towards state-driven gender reforms. However, these policies were met with strong opposition from conservative clerics, most notably Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who openly defied the Shah, condemning women's equal rights and public participation as antithetical to Islamic values. This ideological divide between state-enforced secular reforms and clerical fundamentalist opposition to gender equality played a notable role in shaping the discourse that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.
2. The dance video is available here: https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cpjr8zTIZ-E.
3. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women face severe restrictions on public expression and presence. Singing solo as a woman is prohibited in public and on media platforms; rooftops have become semi-private spaces for protest chants to avoid surveillance; and women have long been banned from entering sports stadiums, with those attempting to defy the rule often facing arrest. Each of these acts, though seemingly mundane elsewhere, challenges entrenched state controls over gendered behaviour, visibility and space. See True, Ahmadi and Ross (2023) for more.
4. The One Million Signatures Campaign was a grassroots movement launched in 2006 by Iranian women's rights activists in Iran to challenge discriminatory laws against women. It sought to gather one million signatures in support of gender equality, advocating for reforms in inheritance, child custody and legal testimony. The campaign faced arrests and state suppression.
5. My Stealthy Freedom, founded by Iranian exiled journalist Masih Alinejad in 2014, emerged as a digital platform where Iranian women could share images and videos of themselves removing their mandatory headscarves publicly in defiance of state-imposed dress codes.
6. IRGC is an armed institution under the command of the Islamic Republic Supreme Leader. Its goal, as spelled out in its constitution, is to protect the Islamic Revolution and its achievements and to realise the divine ideals and spread the law of God (Syracuse University 1982). The IRGC also plays a pivotal extraterritorial role by supporting non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Shia militias in Iraq – a strategy widely seen as state-sponsored terrorism that violates international norms and primarily serves regime survival rather than broader regional or national stability (Demirel 2020).

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