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# Freedom of Movement: Patriarchy, Gender and Space in Iranian Cinema

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Figure 1: A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādiyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Firūzah Khusruvānī, 2020.

## Introduction

Who gets access to which spaces, and why, remains a globally contentious issue. How does gender facilitate or hinder freedom of movement in both public and private spheres? In Iran, where spatial patriarchy is shaped by religious, legal, and social structures, access to space is constantly negotiated—expanding for some while contracting for others. Cinema has long served as a critical lens through which to examine both the enforcement and defiance of gendered boundaries. Through an analysis of Iranian films, this article explores how spatial restrictions are defined, maintained, and transgressed, offering insight into gender-based limitations on movement and the

role of visual culture in challenging these boundaries.

Discussions of freedom of movement inherently reference boundaries—physical, ideological, social, and psychological—which structure systems of privilege and oppression, often disadvantaging women.<sup>1</sup> In Iran, a complex interplay of religious, political, and legal frameworks further restricts gendered mobility. While direct challenges to these structures are often penalized, cinema provides an alternative space for critical engagement with these limitations, exposing their contradictions and the ways in which individuals navigate them.

The construction of gendered and homosocial spaces frequently shrinks women's experiences of the world, restricting their movement even within permitted boundaries. While women in Iran have always been allowed to drive cars, they have faced prohibitions on riding bicycles and motorbikes in unsegregated public spaces since the establishment of the Islamic Republic following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. These restrictions, enforced through religious fatwas, local bans, and social pressures, reveal the ambiguous nature of freedom of movement. The distinction between legally enforced prohibitions and socially upheld restrictions further complicates the issue, as women must navigate not only formal laws but also deeply ingrained cultural expectations that regulate their mobility.

Access to public and private spaces is controlled not only through legal mechanisms but also through societal boundaries that shape and renegotiate acceptable behavior. As scholars Lamont and Molnár argue, moral codes structure society by categorizing objects, spaces, people, and practices.<sup>2</sup> These boundaries often reinforce traditional gender roles, associating private space with women and public space with men as a key manifestation of masculine domination. However, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, these boundaries are not always rigidly defined. While public segregation exists, a complex and often implicit system of gendered spatial norms operates within both private and public spheres, continually shaping and renegotiating women's access and movement. This fluidity creates unpredictable enforcement, reinforcing the precarious nature of women's freedom in public spaces.

<sup>1</sup>Judith M. Gerson and Kathy Peiss, "Boundaries, Negotiation, Consciousness: Reconceptualizing Gender Relations," *Social Problems* 32, no. 4 (1985): 317–31. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1985.32.4.03a00020>.

<sup>2</sup>Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2002): 167–95, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107>.

By analyzing seven films—five of which were directed by women—this study investigates how both state mechanisms and societal boundary-work construct, define, and maintain gender-based restrictions, shaping opportunities for men and women. It examines the role of patriarchy, religion, and legal structures in regulating gendered movement, access to space, and participation in public life. Additionally, the study explores how women themselves contribute to enforcing these restrictions, identifying which groups play a role and how such limitations are implemented.

Beyond analyzing constraints, the article considers acts of transgression and resistance against established gendered borders. It explores the subversive methods used in cultural production to both expose and challenge these boundaries, examining how visible and invisible spatial restrictions are defied and how such acts are framed as violations of conventional femininity and masculinity. Where violence is used to regulate gendered movement, the study identifies the perpetrators and interrogates the justifications and methods through which such violence is enacted.

Finally, this article examines instances where the Islamic Republic has, at times, created unexpected opportunities for women to engage in public life. It considers how the regime's ideological framework has mobilized certain groups of women, paradoxically expanding their access to various spaces. By engaging with these questions, the article contributes to broader discussions on gender, space, and power within contemporary Iran.

The article is structured into four thematic sections, each analyzing how gendered access to space is constructed, contested, and occasionally expanded in Iranian cinema. The first section examines how legal and religious codes formally regulate movement, analyzing *The Day I Became a Woman* (Rūzī ki zan shudam, 2000), *Offside* (Āfsāyd, 2006), and *Permission* ('Araq-i Sard, 2018). The second analyzes the influence of tradition and patriarchy, using *Nāhīd* (2015) and *Son-Mother* (Pisar, mādar, 2019) to explore how informal power structures and domestic expectations limit women's movement. The



third section turns to acts of transgression and resistance, analyzing how *African Violet* (Banafshah-yi Afrīqā'ī, 2019) portrays subtle defiance of gendered norms within private spaces. The final section investigates how the Islamic Republic has paradoxically enabled certain women's participation in public life, using *Radiograph of a Family* (Rādīyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah, 2020) to explore these contradictions. Together, these case studies illuminate the complex and often contradictory ways gender, space, and power interact in contemporary Iran.

## 1. Religious and Legal Codes

“Every morning, you get up, play football, and come back in the evening like a corpse. This football has ruined our lives. Aren't you a woman? Don't you have a life? Don't you need to make babies? Don't you have a husband? Am I not important to you?”

Yāsir to Afrūz, (Permission, Suhayl Bayraqī, 2018)

The *Day I Became a Woman* (Marziyah Mishkīnī, 2000) offers a poignant exploration of freedom of movement and the gendered boundaries that restrict it in Iran. Mishkīnī's film masterfully depicts how religious interpretations and social norms impose limitations on women's mobility, revealing the intersections of patriarchal control, cultural traditions, and personal resistance. Structured in three segments, each centered on a female character at a different stage of life, the film illustrates how ideological and societal boundaries shape women's autonomy. The first story follows Havā, a young girl about to turn nine, marking the moment when she must begin adhering to Islamic Sharia rules that dictate female dress and behavior. The second story follows Āhū, a young woman competing in a women's cycling race, facing mounting pressure from the men in her life who attempt to stop her—symbolizing the struggle for autonomy. The final story follows Hūrā, an elderly woman in a wheelchair who, after a lifetime of restrictions, finally gains financial independence and travels from Tehran to Kish to buy everything she was once denied. *The Day I Became a Woman* captures pivotal moments in a woman's life, illustrating both the societal pressures they endure and the acts of resistance they face when

<sup>3</sup>Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 169.

challenging societal norms. It reveals how gendered boundaries are created, reinforced, and ultimately contested by those seeking freedom.



Figure 2: Havā, from the first story, watches the shadow cast by the stick she planted in the ground. A still from the film *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Rūzī ki zan shudam*), directed by Marziyah Mishkīnī, 2000. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWGbmQKN8-I> (00:15:20).

Havā's transition into adulthood at nine signifies the abrupt end of her childhood freedoms, as she is forced to conform to religious and social codes. Under the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Sharia, girls are considered to reach adulthood at the age of nine, at which point religious duties become obligatory.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Havā's birthday marks her transition into adulthood, bringing with it restrictions on her behavior, appearance, and movement through public spaces. She is compelled to veil, terminate her friendship with Hasan, and abide by the spatial divisions imposed on her. Mishkīnī's cinematography effectively captures the confinement and claustrophobia of womanhood. The dry stick given to Havā to measure time serves as a powerful analogy for Sharia's rigidity, emphasizing how religious and social norms contract women's spaces. Her last hour of childhood, symbolized by the shrinking shadow of the stick, is visually juxtaposed with the boys playing freely on the beach, highlighting the stark gendered disparity in access to space.

Āhū's story offers a compelling portrayal of a woman's struggle for autonomy against the backdrop of patriarchal tradition as she participates in a cycling competition, defying her husband and family's expectations. Unlike Havā, Āhū refuses to yield to the metaphorical shadow of the stick by choosing to ride a bicycle—a symbol of movement, agency, and freedom. However, her act of defiance is met with relentless pursuit. Her husband, along with religious authorities and male relatives, chase her on horseback, commanding her to stop. This pursuit vividly illustrates how patriarchal guardianship operates to restrict women's mobility, reinforcing the belief that women's presence in public spaces must be supervised and controlled.

The initial image of Āhū cycling along a vast, open road by the sea evokes a sense of boundless freedom. However, this sense of liberation is quickly disrupted by the arrival of her husband and other male figures, who seek to reinstate patriarchal order. His sarcastic remarks to other cyclists reveal the entrenched perception that women's mobility is a transgression that must be corrected. The horses, in contrast to the fragile but persistent movement of Āhū's bicycle, serve as powerful symbols of patriarchal tradition and dominance. The stark contrast between Āhū, fully covered and struggling to maintain her pace, and the bare-chested men on horseback further emphasizes the unequal burden placed on women. Despite her determination, the surrounding male figures remain a constant reminder of the societal boundaries she cannot escape.



Figure 3: Āhū, from the second story, cycling in defiance of her family's wishes. A still from the film *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Rūzī ki zan shudam*), directed by Marziyah Mishkīnī, 2000. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWGbmQKN8-I\(00:27:27\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWGbmQKN8-I(00:27:27)).

Āhū's defiance intensifies as she pedals faster, refusing to submit to her husband's demands. The societal and religious constraints on women's freedom become even more pronounced when a cleric intervenes, likening the bicycle to an instrument of Satan. Despite these escalating pressures, Āhū's silent resolve remains unbroken, demonstrating her unwavering resistance. However, as her family members encircle her, their horses reinforcing the omnipresence of patriarchal control, her fate becomes ambiguous. The story's conclusion contemplates the precariousness of women's autonomy within a deeply patriarchal society. Mishkīnī's use of symbolism and striking visual contrasts underscores the ongoing struggle for women's independence and the formidable barriers they must overcome.

Hūrā's story reflects the enduring impact of gender-based restrictions throughout a woman's life. As an elderly woman with newfound financial independence, she seeks to reclaim the experiences she was denied. However, her continued reliance on young boys for mobility suggests that patriarchal constraints persist even when direct control fades. Hūrā's hesitation over a transparent glass teapot, calling it "shameless" for being naked, reveals how deeply ingrained societal expectations continue to shape her perception of modesty. Despite

being free from familial control, she remains bound by internalized norms that dictate what is appropriate. Her departure on a raft, laden with the possessions she never had, becomes a surreal image of delayed freedom—one that raises questions about whether material autonomy can ever truly compensate for a lifetime of restrictions.



Figure 4: Havā and her mother watch Hūrā sail away—an image that quietly foreshadows Havā's own future. A still from the film *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Rūzi ki zan shudam*), directed by Marziyah Mishkīnī, 2000. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWGbmQKN8-I> (00:10:17).

While veiling is a prominent theme illustrating women's regulation within society, *The Day I Became a Woman* is not solely about veiling. Instead, it examines the evolving forms of oppression and restriction that shape women's lives at different stages. These constraints are not only imposed by the state but also reinforced by family and loved ones. In childhood, female relatives, such as mothers and grandmothers, often act as enforcers of patriarchal rules, ensuring that girls adhere to societal expectations. In adolescence and young adulthood, male family members take on this role, enforcing control through surveillance and, when necessary, violence to uphold family honor. By old age, these restrictions are no longer externally imposed but are deeply internalized, shaping the way women perceive and engage with the world. The power of tradition often proves more compelling than legal enforcement, and any challenge to entrenched norms is met with resistance, sometimes even hostility.

<sup>4</sup>Maryam Maruf, "Offside Rules: An Interview with Jafar Panahi," openDemocracy, June 6, 2006, [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/offside\\_3620jsp/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/offside_3620jsp/).

<sup>5</sup>Maryam Maruf, "Offside Rules: An Interview with Jafar Panahi," openDemocracy, June 6, 2006, [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/offside\\_3620jsp/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/offside_3620jsp/).

Other filmmakers have explored public spaces that are entirely inaccessible to women, such as sports stadiums. In *Offside* (2006), Ja'far Panāhī highlights the challenges faced by female football fans who disguise themselves as men to infiltrate the forbidden space of the stadium. The film follows a group of young women caught attempting to enter and detained outside its walls while the real-time Iran-Bahrain World Cup qualifying match unfolds inside. By centering the narrative on those forcibly excluded rather than those inside the stadium, Panāhī highlights the absurdity of their exclusion and the frustration of being so physically close yet entirely cut off from the experience. The film's documentary-style realism and real-time unfolding of events intensify the sense of injustice, making the audience share in the women's imposed confinement.



Figure 5: A still from the film *Offside*, directed by Ja'far Panāhī, 2006.

Referring to the prohibition on women attending football matches, Panāhī distinguishes this restriction from the attitudes of Iranian men, arguing that it reflects an "official mentality" rather than widespread male opposition. He suggests that most Iranian men do not oppose women being present at matches, and that the restriction stems from state ideology rather than cultural consensus.<sup>4</sup> Criticizing the fact that women must resort to cross-dressing to enter stadiums, he describes this necessity as humiliating.<sup>5</sup> The women in *Offside* are not just denied

access to the match but are also subjected to surveillance and containment, illustrating how their mere presence in male-dominated spaces is perceived as disruptive.

Although no formal law explicitly bans female fans from entering stadiums, enforcement occurs through an unwritten rule implemented by security forces. In *Offside*, the soldiers responsible for detaining the women are depicted as merely following orders rather than personally invested in upholding the ban. Their reluctance to enforce the restriction reflects the disconnect between the official stance and broader societal attitudes. This portrayal subtly critiques the arbitrariness of such regulations, which, while lacking legal codification, are upheld through the state's control over public space.

Despite their exclusion, the women's spirit is not entirely broken. Within the confined space where they are held, one woman reimagines the stadium, positioning the six captives as Iranian football players and acting out the match taking place beyond the stadium walls. By creating an imagined version of what they are denied, she transforms the space of confinement into one of resistance. This theme of imagining and reconstructing inaccessible spaces echoes Panāhī's later work, *This Is Not a Film* (Īn film nāst, 2011) in which, after being sentenced to a 20-year ban on filmmaking, he reenacts scenes from one of his scripts within his living room while under house arrest. Like the women in *Offside*, Panāhī delineates the boundaries of an imagined space he longs to inhabit, reenacting how his characters would have navigated restrictions placed upon them.

While *Offside* focuses on women's exclusion from public sporting spaces, Suhayl Bayraqī's *Permission* (2018), also known as *Cold Sweat*, shifts attention to female athletes themselves, illustrating how legal codes restrict their mobility. Although the film begins with a disclaimer stating that it is not based on real events, its similarity to the real-life case of a female athlete barred from leaving Iran by her husband is unmistakable.<sup>6</sup> Afrūz

<sup>6</sup>In 2015, Nīlūfār Ardalān, captain of the Iranian women's national futsal team, was prevented from leaving the country for the AFC Women's Futsal Championship in Malaysia after her husband exercised his legal right to ban her travel. The incident sparked national and international controversy, leading to a special permit from the Attorney General, allowing her to compete in the 2015 Women's World Futsal Championship in Guatemala. Her husband, Mahdī Tūtūnchī, was a presenter on IRIB's sports entertainment program *The Pleasure of Football* (*Lazzat-i Fūtbāl*), mirroring the dynamic in *Permission*. Similarly, in 2021, Samīrā Zargārī, head coach of the Iranian Alpine Ski Team, was barred from traveling to the World Championship in Italy after her husband invoked the same law, preventing her from accompanying her team.

Ardistānī, the captain of Iran’s national futsal team, is prevented from traveling to an international match when her estranged husband, Yāsir Shāhhusaynī, exercises his legal right to forbid her from leaving the country. After eleven years of dedication to the sport, Afrūz is stopped at airport security and informed that she cannot join her team for the AFC Women’s Futsal Championship in Malaysia. Her desperate attempts to challenge the decision over the following days are futile, as the legal system grants husbands unchecked authority over their wives’ mobility. As her lawyer explains, “The rule is very clear: a man can ban a woman from leaving the country without any reason. It is legal.”



Figure 6: Afrūz learns at airport passport control that she is not permitted to leave the country. A still from *Permission* (*Araq-i Sard*), directed by Suhayl Bayraqī, 2018. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2XCLJHzR1Q> (00:09:44).

Afrūz adheres to the Islamic dress code in public, and the spaces where she competes are fully segregated and controlled in accordance with theocratic mandates. Yet, her compliance with these regulations does not exempt her from systemic restrictions. The control over women’s bodies extends beyond modesty laws to encompass their aspirations and pursuit of opportunities. The legal system offers Afrūz no recourse, despite the judge’s recognition of the injustice she faces. As she and her lawyer appeal to the court, Yāsir revels in his unchecked power,

refusing to justify his decision beyond stating, “I don’t need a reason. I don’t want her to leave. The law gives me this right, and I intend to exercise it.” When pressed further, he frames his actions as a matter of national integrity, accusing Afrūz of wanting to remove her hijab once abroad, defect to a European country, and even engaging in behaviors he suggests would be “shameful” to the Islamic Republic. His vague insinuations, including a suggestion of homosexuality, reinforce how patriarchal control over women’s mobility is often justified through moral anxieties about preserving the state’s values.



Figure 7: Afrūz and Yāsir at the registry office, where she forfeits her marriage portion in exchange for permission to leave the country. A still from the film *Permission* (\*Araq-i Sard), directed by Suhayl Bayraqī, 2018. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2XCLJHzR1Q> (00:39:17).

Yāsir further exploits his legal power by removing Afrūz from the national team and orchestrating her dismissal. He claims that she has transgressed the societal boundaries that define acceptable female behavior and presents himself as a guardian of morality, reinforcing the role of the state, tradition, and religion in policing women’s actions. Although *Permission* is framed around women’s sports, its central theme extends beyond athletics, exposing the broader restrictions imposed on women in all aspects of public life.

Yāsir’s power extends beyond legal restrictions, as he weap-

onizes Afrūz's desperation to force her into submission. He demands that she renounce her marriage portion and endure a humiliating relationship in exchange for his permission to leave. Not content with stripping her of her professional career, he has her fired from the federation and evicted from her home, leaving her with no financial security. As Afrūz's world closes in, she is forced to live in her car and work as a driver to survive. Meanwhile, Yāsir, despite his cruelty, remains a respected public figure, free to move as he pleases. When Afrūz confronts him, he taunts her with his impunity: "If I lose my job, I will go abroad. What about you? You can't do anything. You'll be stuck here because I want you to be." His words reveal the deeply embedded gendered hierarchies that enable men to control women's lives with impunity.



Figure 8: Afrūz stands at the entrance of her flat, evicted by Yāsir. Still from the film *Permission* (*'Araq-i Sard*), directed by Suhayl Bayraqī, 2018. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2XCLJHzR1Q> (00:51:52).

While the power struggles between a vindictive husband and his wife are not unique to Iranian patriarchy, what sets this case apart is the legal framework that legitimizes and reinforces Yāsir's control. The fusion of patriarchal norms and state-enforced authority intensifies the injustice, leaving women with no legal avenues to contest such restrictions. The law does not merely reflect cultural attitudes but actively constructs and perpetuates

inequality, safeguarding male dominance under the guise of religious and legal legitimacy. Despite Afrūz's relentless attempts to escape her confinement, she remains trapped within a system that not only genders space but also dictates the boundaries of permitted movement according to male authority.

The film further reveals how patriarchal control is not exclusively upheld by men but is often enforced by women who benefit from the system. In *The Day I Became a Woman*, male family members regulate a young woman's aspirations. In *Permission*, however, the figure imposing restrictions is Mihrānah Nūrī, the team supervisor responsible for enforcing modesty rules. Despite having no expertise in the sport, Mihrānah holds significant power over the players and actively sabotages Afrūz's chances of attending the match. Her enforcement of patriarchal values is not driven solely by ideology but by her own vested interest in maintaining her privileged position. Unlike Afrūz, she enjoys certain freedoms—owning luxury items, traveling abroad, and navigating Iranian society with ease—privileges she secures by aligning with the system that oppresses others.

Even though *Permission* ends with Afrūz having lost much, it does not portray her as entirely defeated. The film echoes the sentiment of her lawyer, who, after exhausting all legal options, tells her, "There's nothing we can do. If we stay quiet, they take away your rights; if we make noise, they take away your rights. It's a lose-lose game. We do this hoping that one day it might finally make a difference to someone else." This statement encapsulates the broader theme of resistance, emphasizing that even if change is not immediate, challenging injustice remains crucial. Afrūz's struggle serves as a testament to the ongoing fight against systemic oppression, highlighting the resilience of women who continue to push against legal and social barriers despite overwhelming odds. *Permission* also reflects on its own impact, suggesting that even if it does not bring immediate change, it might still play a subtle role in shaping conversations and perspectives that could contribute to social change over time.

The films analyzed in this section—*The Day I Became a Woman*, *Offside*, and *Permission*—each reveal how religious, legal, and social structures intersect to regulate women’s mobility, yet they do so through different narrative and stylistic approaches. *The Day I Became a Woman* presents a life-cycle perspective, illustrating how gendered restrictions evolve across a woman’s life, from childhood to old age. Through its tripartite structure, the film highlights the cumulative nature of these restrictions—what begins as a forced veil and spatial segregation in childhood escalates into relentless social and familial control in adulthood and internalized constraints in old age.

While *Mishkīnī*’s film explores how restrictions are embedded in social norms and religious mandates, *Offside* and *Permission* focus on legal structures and their enforcement by state mechanisms. In *Offside*, Panāhī critiques the arbitrary, unwritten rules that bar women from public sporting spaces, showing how these regulations are inconsistently enforced and lack widespread social consensus. The soldiers detaining the female football fans express discomfort with their orders, revealing the disjuncture between state ideology and societal attitudes. In contrast, *Permission* tackles a formalized legal constraint, demonstrating how male guardianship laws grant husbands unchecked authority over their wives’ mobility. While *Offside* depicts resistance through satire and collective defiance, *Permission* presents a more harrowing reality, exposing the ways legal systems codify patriarchal control, stripping women of both physical and economic autonomy.

Despite their differences in tone and approach, all three films illustrate how women’s freedom of movement in Iran is precariously situated between legal mandates, religious interpretations, and deeply entrenched social expectations. Whether through symbolic imagery, documentary-style realism, or legal drama, these films foreground the struggles of women who navigate, challenge, and at times succumb to these restrictions. In doing so, they not only reflect lived realities but also serve as sites of



critique and resistance, offering alternative narratives that expose and interrogate the mechanisms of gendered control.

## 2. Tradition and Patriarchal Dictates

“I gave up my dowry in exchange for custody of my son during the divorce. If I remarry, I’ll lose him.”

— Nāhīd explaining to her boyfriend why she refuses his marriage proposal in *Nāhīd* (Āydā Panāhandah, 2015)



Figure 9: Nāhīd heartbroken as she turns down the marriage proposal of the man she loves. A still from the film *Nāhīd*, directed by Āydā Panāhandah, 2015. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18\\_PN9J1oo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18_PN9J1oo) (00:10:34).

The two films analyzed as case studies in this section, *Nāhīd* and *Son-Mother*, explore the intersection of tradition, social class, and patriarchy—and how these factors limit women’s movement and access to space. Women’s sexuality is central to these discussions, as the films examine the complexity of tradition through the lens of temporary marriage and remarriage. Though legally and religiously sanctioned, these practices are often condemned by societal norms, reinforcing the contradictions between religious law and traditional values.

While Islamic law permits and even encourages remarriage, traditional values frequently cast judgment on women who

<sup>7</sup>On temporary marriages in Iran see Shahla Haeri., *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), and Claudia Yaghoobi, *Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (London: Verso, 2020), 40.

choose this path, framing them within rigid moral boundaries. In *Nāhīd*, the protagonist longs to marry the man she loves but fears losing custody of her son if she remarries. Conversely, in *Son-Mother*, the protagonist is compelled to enter a marriage that risks separating her from her son in order to secure a better future for her daughter—facing a heart-wrenching choice akin to a modern-day “Sophie’s choice.” Both films highlight the contradictory demands placed on women by religious law and societal tradition. Temporary marriages, though legally permissible, remain socially stigmatized, illustrating how patriarchal dictates restrict women’s autonomy and mobility within both private and public spheres.<sup>7</sup>

Āydā Panāhandah’s *Nāhīd* (2015) examines a woman’s desire for autonomy within Iran’s social and legal restrictions around divorce, custody, parenthood, love, and honor. As a divorced single mother, *Nāhīd* works tirelessly in a low-paying job to fund her son’s private education and extracurricular activities despite her own financial struggles. Her economic hardship is symbolically reinforced by the river that separates her marginalized neighborhood from the city, accessible only by a hired boat. This physical divide mirrors the social and economic barriers that restrict *Nāhīd*’s aspirations for upward mobility.

*Nāhīd*’s efforts to “gentrify” her parenting, borrowing from Sharon Hays’ concept, highlight the emotionally exhausting, labor-intensive, and financially demanding aspects of motherhood.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Leslie Kern’s analysis of maternal scholarship, *Nāhīd*’s challenges resonate with the Western notion of a “new mystique of motherhood,” which emerged as a backlash against women’s social, sexual, and economic independence in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>9</sup> In the Iranian context, women’s increased social presence and economic independence have coincided with intensifying pressures tied to the “mystique of motherhood.” This shift has led to the “gentrification of parenting,” often defined by the products, brands, styles, and activities associated with middle- and upper-class urban households. However,

as Kern argues, “the amount of time, money, and emotional labor required to do this parenting work is simply not available to most families and mothers in particular.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (London: Verso, 2020), 40.

At the same time, Nāhīd’s aspirations for her son clash with his indifference toward the educational opportunities she sacrifices so much to provide. Her struggle for independence is thus shaped not only by her gender but also by her socio-economic status and habitus. Moreover, in a society where traditional childcare networks are giving way to nuclear family aspirations and rising single-parent households, the dependence on paid childcare poses severe challenges, especially for lower-income families, as seen in both the films discussed here. Nāhīd’s attempt to simulate a gentrified life is evident not only in her parenting but also in her transformation of private spaces. Her insistence on purchasing a red sofa she cannot afford symbolizes this effort. The sofa, ill-suited to both her modest surroundings and the narrow stairways of her apartment building, stands as a striking metaphor for the dissonance between her aspirations and her socio-economic reality.



Figure 10: Nāhīd’s son in their modest, rented flat. A still from the film *Nāhīd*, directed by Āydā Panāhandah, 2015. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18\\_PN9J1oo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18_PN9J1oo) (00:54:56).

Nāhīd’s fragile independence is abruptly curtailed when her

ex-husband discovers her romantic involvement. Although legally in a temporary marriage, she faces severe consequences due to the intersection of legal constraints, social stigma, and male control over female sexuality. Her ex-husband granted her custody of their son on the condition that she remain unmarried, forcing her to keep her relationship secret. While temporary marriages are legally sanctioned, they remain socially frowned upon, compelling Nāhīd to conceal her union from both her family and the broader community. Her autonomy is conditional—permitted only so long as she remains sexually unavailable to other men.

Once her relationship becomes known, male guardianship swiftly reasserts itself. Her ex-husband exploits his legal authority to revoke custody, acting out of jealousy rather than genuine concern. Her brother, assuming the role of patriarch, views her actions as a grave dishonor and forcibly returns her to the parental home, where she is stripped of autonomy. By controlling her access to work, mobility, and even personal relationships, both men assert dominance over her body and choices. Confined to the house and forbidden from working, she is rendered dependent and unwelcome, particularly by her overburdened sister-in-law. Her displacement underscores how male control over female sexuality operates not only through law but also through familial and societal enforcement. While Nāhīd outwardly appears independent, her habitus—shaped by deeply ingrained gendered norms—ultimately constrains her.





Figure 11: Nāhīd's ex-husband confronts her after discovering she is in a relationship with another man. A still from the film Nāhīd, directed by Āydā Panāhandah, 2015. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18\\_PN9J1oo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G18_PN9J1oo) (01:06:45).

Nāhīd's predicament highlights the contradictory demands placed on women by religious laws, tradition, and modernity. While legally entitled to remarry, she faces the harsh reality that doing so would cost her custody of her son. Even though her ex-husband is an unsuitable parent due to addiction, unemployment, and lack of housing, the state prioritizes patriarchal authority over parental suitability, deeming Nāhīd's remarriage a greater threat to her custody rights than his circumstances. This legally enforced patriarchy extends male control over her sexuality beyond marriage, dictating her post-divorce choices. Simultaneously, she must navigate the social stigma attached to temporary marriages, illustrating the complex intersections of legal, cultural, and traditional constraints that continue to shape women's lives.

All instances of violence against women in the film unfold within private spaces, highlighting the hidden nature of domestic oppression. Unlike men, who face violence in public or liminal spaces, Nāhīd's primary threats stem from domestic settings, where male domination is most pervasive. This dynamic underscores how private spaces can become arenas of control, violence, and subjugation for women. Nāhīd's fear intensifies

within these confined spaces, contrasting with the relative freedom she finds in public. Public spaces offer her brief moments of autonomy, such as when she changes from a dark, conservative veil to a brighter, looser scarf in alleyways before meeting her boyfriend.

This contrast between private and public spaces also shapes Nāhīd's struggle for independence. While the law and family impose rigid boundaries around her personal choices, she momentarily reclaims agency in the city's public spaces, where surveillance is less immediate. However, this autonomy remains fragile, as her mobility is still dictated by social expectations and familial control, reinforcing how women's freedom of movement is both spatially and socially constructed.



Figure 12: Laylā and her two children. A still from the film *Son-Mother* (Pisar, Mādar), directed by Mahnāz Muhammādī, 2019.

The social stigma of being a single mother and the challenges of navigating social and private spaces are explored again in Mahnāz Muhammādī's *Son-Mother* (2019). In this film, the loss of reputation further restricts the protagonist's movement, even more so than in Nāhīd. Laylā, a young widow and mother of two, lives in a disadvantaged Tehran neighborhood, far from her family in the village. Each day, she commutes between her

modest rented home and a factory on the city's outskirts, a reversal of Nāhīd's situation. The company shuttle is the most affordable transportation, but the unwanted attention of Kāzim, the driver, intensifies Laylā's vulnerability, pushing her further into desperation. As the factory faces mass redundancies, jobs are prioritized for sole breadwinners like Laylā. However, when she refuses to join the strikes, her colleagues retaliate by falsely claiming she is married to Kāzim. This accusation jeopardizes her employment, as only sole breadwinners are protected from layoffs.

The claustrophobic space of the minibus, with Kāzim's piercing gaze and the watchful eyes of her male colleagues, transforms this liminal space into a public stage where Laylā is simultaneously desired, scrutinized, and punished for a fabricated relationship. As a result, she loses not only her job but also her ability to support her children. The ensuing destitution and social stigma paralyze her, leaving her with no choice but to accept Kāzim's marriage proposal—one she had previously rejected due to its harsh terms. Kāzim agrees to let Laylā bring her toddler daughter into the new marital home but forbids her adolescent son from living with them, claiming that his presence would threaten the family's honor. He argues that it would be inappropriate for his adolescent daughter from a previous marriage to share a home with an unrelated adolescent boy, reflecting his deep-seated concern for reputation and patriarchal codes of honor.

Both mother and son become prisoners to Kāzim's rigid moral dictates. However, Kāzim is not portrayed as a cruel or unfeeling character but rather as a man entrenched in traditional values he perceives as beyond his control. His defense of female honor, often referred to as *ghayrat* and closely tied to masculinity and manhood, defines the boundaries within which both female and male family members must maneuver. While Laylā's movement is restricted due to gender, her son's exclusion from the household demonstrates how patriarchal codes

<sup>11</sup>Introduction to *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space*, eds. Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 20.

dictate who belongs within the family unit and who must be cast out. Kāzīm's privileged role as the male head of the household allows him to decide who is included and excluded, reinforcing how tradition and patriarchal authority structure familial space.



Figure 13: Kāzīm and Amīr come face to face for the first time near the end of the film. A still from the film *Son-Mother (Pisar, Mādar)*, directed by Mahnāz Muhammadi, 2019. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f\\_CLoiT5iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f_CLoiT5iM) (01:23:41).

*Son-Mother* also highlights the blurred boundaries between public and private spaces. For Kāzīm, the son's presence would transform the home into a public space in the eyes of the community, subjecting it to external scrutiny and judgment. As Gómez Reus and Usandizaga argue in the context of Western spaces, the concepts of public and private are fluid and require a nuanced understanding beyond simple dichotomies.<sup>11</sup> Kāzīm's refusal to let the boy live in his home reflects not only a concern about gendered interactions but also a deep fear of social perception and honor-based shame. Even though Laylā is present to uphold patriarchal guardianship in Kāzīm's absence, her son remains unwelcome, reinforcing how patriarchy dictates movement and access not only for women but also for men.



Figure 14: Bībī Serving food at the boarding school for deaf boys. A still from the film *Son-Mother* (Pisar, Mādar), directed by Mahnāz Muḥammādī, 2019. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f\\_CLoiT5iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f_CLoiT5iM) (01:00:22).

With no alternatives and her resources depleted, Laylā is ultimately forced to accept Bībī’s offer—a janitor at a school for the deaf—who orchestrates a plan for her son to assume a false identity as deaf and mute in order to live in a boarding school for deaf boys. While both mother and son view this as a temporary sacrifice, the film hints that their separation will be indefinite. The film underscores the cruelty of tradition that victimizes all, regardless of gender. In this instance, the son’s gender works against him, demonstrating how patriarchal honor codes not only restrict women but also punish men who pose a threat to the patriarchal structure itself. Though intended to uphold honor, these rigid expectations ultimately fracture the very family unit they claim to protect.

Divided into two sections—“Son” from the mother’s perspective and “Mother” from the son’s perspective—the film masterfully explores patriarchal oppression from both angles. Inspired by the real-life separation of Muḥammādī’s father from his mother, *Son-Mother* examines how patriarchal dictates not only shape women’s lives but also restrict male agency, particularly when tradition deems their presence inappropriate. Laylā’s son is excluded from the most fundamental space for a child—the

family—not for anything he has done, but simply because of his gender. His displacement exposes how honor-based systems police not only women’s mobility but also dictate which men are permitted within the family unit, reinforcing an oppressive cycle that ultimately harms all involved.



Figure 15: Amīr at the boarding school for deaf boys. A still from the film *Son-Mother (Pisar, Mā-dar)*, directed by Mahnāz Muhammādī, 2019. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f\\_CLoiT5iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f_CLoiT5iM) (01:07:00).

The two films analyzed in this section highlight how women’s personal lives are tightly controlled by tradition. Neither Nāhīd nor Laylā transgresses religious or legal stipulations, yet their ambitions for independence as single mothers are restricted by societal notions of right and wrong, public and private. In Nāhīd, her ex-husband and brother enforce tradition’s demands, using legal mechanisms like custody laws to control her. In *Son-Mother*, the absence of male family members does not protect Laylā from patriarchal constraints, as her male colleagues undermine her reputation, sever her access to her late husband’s pension, and force her out of employment. This underscores how patriarchal surveillance extends beyond the family unit, with societal structures collectively enforcing gendered norms. Reputation and honor, rather than merely personal or familial concerns, operate as mechanisms of social regulation, ensuring women’s compliance with established expectations.



Figure 16: Amīr and a group of boys are called to the principal’s office after a fight in the lunch hall. A still from the film *Son-Mother* (*Pisar, Mādar*), directed by Mahnāz Muhammadi, 2019. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f\\_CLoiT5iM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f_CLoiT5iM) (01:12:17).

Both Nāhīd and *Son-Mother* depict the devastating consequences of patriarchal control, yet they also highlight differences in how class and social background shape women’s options. Nāhīd, an urban woman familiar with the city’s complexities and supported by a small network of friends, ultimately returns to her husband despite her family’s objections. Laylā, from a rural background and isolated in a large metropolitan city, faces fewer opportunities for work and lacks any family or social support. Her only form of assistance comes from Bibi, whose exploitative role profits from separating children from desperate mothers. Both women struggle to maintain their fragile independence, with the separation from their sons serving as the ultimate price for survival. Their stories underscore how class, education, and social capital shape access to autonomy and survival within patriarchal constraints, illustrating that gendered restrictions are deeply intertwined with socio-economic realities.

### 3. Transgression and Resistance

“Men are like brothers—we’ve all messed up sometimes in

our lives. What matters is that our women don't find out about them. We'll get in trouble if they do."

—Rizā to Farīdūn, when trying to help him after he wet his bed, African Violet (Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019)



Figure 17: A still from the film African Violet (*Banafshah-yi Āfirqā'ī*), directed by Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019.

While it is crucial to examine the restrictions imposed on women through legal, religious, and traditional structures in Iranian society, it is equally important to avoid reducing women to stereotypes of victimhood. Women's experiences in Iran are diverse, and while many films highlight the challenges they face, they also depict acts of defiance and instances where the Islamic Republic has, unexpectedly, led to the expansion of spaces for certain groups, particularly those aligned with its ideology. In reality, the spaces available to women have both contracted and expanded since the revolution, though the cases of expansion remain limited to specific demographics.

Some films have explored the different ways women successfully defy both visible and invisible spatial boundaries imposed upon them. These are not necessarily acts of organized activism or overt resistance but rather everyday forms of defiance that subtly challenge imposed restrictions. African Violet

(Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019) is one such example, illustrating how women push against patriarchal norms by redefining the boundaries that confine them. The film portrays spatial and social transgressions as acts of empowerment, demonstrating how women navigate and reshape the spaces imposed upon them.

Inspired by real events from the director's own family, *African Violet* tells the story of Shukūh, a married, middle-aged woman living in a small town in northern Iran, who is shocked to discover that her adult children from her first marriage have abandoned their father, Farīdūn, in a nursing home. Defying societal expectations, and after convincing her second husband, Shukūh brings Farīdūn into their marital home to care for him. She sees her children's actions as an act of ingratitude and finds it unacceptable that they have placed their father in an institution.



Figure 18: Shukūh allows her ex-husband back into her home. A still from the film *African Violet* (*Banafshah-yi Āfirīqā'ī*), directed by Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNNypscPMPc> (00:05:37).

Unburdened by grudges or social taboos, Shukūh is guided by compassion rather than convention. Despite their acrimonious divorce and Farīdūn's past decision to estrange the children from their mother for two decades, she steps in where she feels they have failed. Her defiance is not a singular act but an ongoing resistance against prevailing social expectations and gendered

norms. By bringing both her current and ex-husband under the same roof, she disrupts societal perceptions of propriety. Yet, rather than seeking external validation, she remains steadfast in her own principles, prioritizing integrity over imposed notions of respectability.

The film's tension emerges as both men struggle with their sense of *ghayrat*, usually defined as protection of sexual honor. Farīdūn must reconcile his dependence on his ex-wife and her husband, while Rizā grapples with the threat to his reputation for sharing his household with his wife's former partner. However, the film reconfigures the concept of honor, shifting it from male-centered notions of control to moral integrity and responsibility. For Shukūh, honor is not dictated by social judgment but by ethical commitment. Through her quiet defiance, the household dynamic is redefined, demonstrating how women's resistance can transcend restrictive spatial boundaries and reshape entrenched norms.



Figure 19: Shukūh sits at the centre of the table, with her husband and ex-husband on either side, sharing lunch in her family home. A still from the film *African Violet* (*Banafshah-yi Āfriqā'ī*), directed by Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNNypscPMPc> (00:16:13).

As Shukūh asserts her own definition of honor, the men's perception of *sharm* (disgrace) begins to shift. No longer centered on policing a woman's actions, their shame becomes tied to

their own vulnerabilities. Over time, a reluctant sense of mutual compassion develops between them. Rizā discreetly helps Farīdūn maintain his dignity by covering up his incontinence, shielding him from embarrassment. In turn, Farīdūn, upon learning of Rizā's financial struggles, offers assistance in a way that preserves his pride. In challenging traditional notions of honor, the film ultimately fosters a more complex and humanized sense of dignity, detached from patriarchal expectations.

Another critical aspect of Shukūh's story is how Farīdūn exerted control over her relationship with their children after their divorce. By denying her contact with them because she remarried, he enforces patriarchal authority that punishes women for exercising autonomy. This theme of male control over mother-child relationships is a recurring motif, as previously explored in *Nāhīd* and *Son-Mother*. In each of these films, male figures restrict women's access to their children as a means of reinforcing their authority and preserving patriarchal norms. Farīdūn's actions reflect this pattern, reinforcing the idea that a mother's relationship with her children is conditional upon her adherence to traditional gender roles.



Figure 20: Rizā helps Farīdūn change his clothes after an accident. A still from the film *African Violet* (*Banafshah-yi Āfriqā'ī*), directed by Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNNypscPMPc> (00:22:13).

These restrictions highlight how patriarchal structures in Irani-

an society limit women's freedom—not only physically but also emotionally and socially. This control operates through legal, societal, and familial mechanisms, shaping how women navigate their relationships and spaces. In *African Violet*, Shukūh's decision to care for Farīdūn despite his past efforts to sever her connection with their children serves as an act of defiance, reclaiming both her agency and moral authority within a system designed to undermine her independence. Her choice to care for him on her own terms, rather than under patriarchal dictates, is not just an act of compassion but a continuation of her ongoing reclamation of agency—one that must be repeatedly asserted as societal expectations continue to dictate a woman's role and relationships post-divorce.

*African Violet* also subverts traditional norms of male and female freedom of movement, centering on a woman who navigates and redefines gendered spaces and social expectations. As the main breadwinner and entrepreneur, Shukūh runs a modest hand-dyed yarn business from home and moves fluidly between public and private spaces, challenging assumptions about women's restricted mobility. In an inversion of traditional roles, her income supports Rizā, her second husband, allowing him to pursue his creative interests in carpentry and wood art, despite their limited financial returns. The pickup truck Shukūh drives—used for both her business and personal travel—symbolizes her independence, contrasting sharply with Farīdūn's restricted mobility, as he is confined to a wheelchair and dependent on others. This reversal of conventional gender roles underscores Shukūh's autonomy within a system that seeks to constrain her.





Figure 21: Shukūh at work in her home-based workshop, hand-dyeing yarn. A still from the film *African Violet* (*Banafshah-yi Āfrīqāʾī*), directed by Munā Zandī Haqīqī, 2019. Accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNNypscPMPc> (00:47:41).

Moreover, Shukūh moves through her world with confidence and ease, unconstrained by the limitations typically imposed on women. As Rizā points out to Farīdūn, Shukūh knows everyone in their town—men and women, young and old—while Farīdūn, once the patriarch of his family, is now isolated and reliant on the children who dictate his fate. His physical confinement mirrors his psychological entrapment, shaped by resentment and a lifetime of rigid gender expectations. Ironically, it is his loss of patriarchal control due to illness and aging that ultimately enables him to appreciate the simple pleasures of life.

*African Violet* is a powerful narrative of female resistance and the redefinition of gendered access to space. Shukūh subverts societal norms that dictate women’s movement and interactions, refusing to conform to imposed patriarchal boundaries. Instead, she allows her own values of compassion, dignity, and integrity to guide her choices. Her financial independence, the presence of a supportive husband who does not obstruct her quiet resistance, and her unwavering refusal to adhere to norms that contradict her principles enable her to transcend societal conventions. The film highlights how acts of defiance do not always take the form of direct confrontation but can emerge through

<sup>12</sup>Film at Lincoln Center, “Radiograph of a Family Q&A with Firouzeh Khosrovani,” YouTube, posted May 5, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QR\\_fv1m8x4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QR_fv1m8x4).

everyday choices that challenge deeply entrenched structures, demonstrating the fluid and evolving nature of resistance.

#### 4. Expansion of Spaces

“One day the albums were filled with Father’s memories. Now they were emptied of Father. They were filled with photos of Mother and her new friends. Mother’s world was now larger.”

—Narrator, Radiograph of a Family



Figure 22: A still from the film Radiograph of a Family (*Rādiyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Fīrūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:00:32).

Fīrūzah Khusruvānī’s award-winning documentary Radiograph of a Family (2020) offers a nuanced exploration of how the Islamic Republic has, in some cases, paradoxically expanded opportunities for certain women in Iran. Blending personal memories with archival materials, Khusruvānī weaves her family’s story into the broader narrative of Iranian society during the revolution and the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Her father, a secular man, fell in love with her deeply religious mother, and they began their life together in Switzerland, where he worked as a radiologist before the revolution. As Khusruvānī poignantly observes, the revolution did not unfold only in the streets of Iran—it also metaphorically took place within their home.<sup>12</sup>

The idea for the film emerged from Khusruvānī's memory of witnessing her mother tear up her pre-revolutionary photos, in which she was unveiled. As the narrator reflects, "One day, with revolutionary decisiveness, my mother tore up all her unveiled photos to cleanse herself of her past." This act of erasure—her mother's rejection of her pre-revolutionary life—became something Khusruvānī sought to reconstruct through the film, intertwining personal and national histories. *Radiograph of a Family* artfully contrasts her parents' backgrounds through a blend of family photographs, Super 8 films, and fictionalized dialogues, music, and sound. Khusruvānī incorporates both official and non-official archives, drawing from Swiss state records, Iranian television broadcasts, and personal materials such as home videos and photographs. Though the dialogues are staged, they are based on what she calls "possible memories" of her parents. She suggests that, at times, imagination can feel more real than memory.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>MOOOV, "Q&A Firouzeh Khosrovani – 'Radiograph of a Family'," YouTube, posted May 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmx-hc5Ftn9k>.

<sup>14</sup>American Film Institute, "Radiograph of a Family Q&A | AFI DOCS," YouTube, posted June 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7b-aq7HQuBg>.

The house in the film is not the real family home but was built specifically for the project. Designed with long, wide interior spaces, it serves as a microcosm of Iranian society, reflecting the transformations occurring outside its walls. Metaphorically, the film conducts an X-ray of the house, exposing its evolution over time and, in turn, revealing the deeper shifts within the country.<sup>14</sup> Structurally, the revolution serves as the film's midpoint, dividing the narrative into two halves: pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. As the revolution unfolds, gradual yet significant changes become apparent in the home's interior. Wine and music are banned. A Western classical painting of a nude woman—reflecting the father's interest in visual arts—disappears. Some transformations are subtle, such as the trolley that once held alcoholic drinks now carrying a flowerpot. Others are more drastic; the disappearance of furniture and a grand piano suggests their removal due to their association with Western luxury, which conflicted with the revolutionary ideals of simplicity and the austerity measures imposed during the war.

Khusruvānī conveys these shifts not only visually but also

<sup>15</sup>Nazanin Shahrokni, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 14-15.

through sound. In one scene, the house is filled with loud classical music, which is abruptly silenced when the mother tells the father to turn it down. This transformation is reinforced by sound design: the classical music is suddenly cut off, followed by the narrator's reflection:

Maybe Father wanted to say, "You can't turn down classical music; you won't hear some parts of it." But instead, he simply said, "Sure, I'll turn it down." The muffled sound of headphones replaced the loud music. Father no longer had the strength to argue. Now, an entire government stood behind Mother!

Through this deeply personal story, the film challenges the perception of Iranian women as mere victims and disrupts the notion of a singular, homogeneous experience for all women under the Islamic Republic. Despite state restrictions, gender boundaries do not always limit women's opportunities; in some cases, they can even expand them more than for men. In this context, Shahrokni challenges the widely held belief that gender segregation is always restrictive, arguing that such policies can create enabling environments that offer women security and new opportunities.<sup>15</sup> The retelling of Khusruvānī's parents' story demonstrates how Islamized public spaces empowered her mother, facilitating her access to and participation in public life.



Figure 23: A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādiyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Fīrūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:02:30).

Cathleen Hamann, in her study of Victorian philanthropists, shows how upper- and middle-class women moved beyond the idleness of their private lives through travel and philanthropy, adopting new roles in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the Islamic Republic, religious devotion and work have enabled some women to assume roles traditionally seen as masculine, granting them mobility and opportunities they might not have otherwise had. Radiograph of a Family illustrates this shift as Khusruvānī's mother, who had previously been absent from public life, suddenly finds purpose in meaningful work, a voice in politics, and a role in social reform. Her transformation even prepares her to navigate spaces typically reserved for men, including the traditionally masculine domain of war.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 24: A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādīyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Firūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:01:10).

In her interviews, Khusruvānī expands on this idea, arguing that the revolution was actually a path-opener for many women. She explains that her mother was always strong-willed—more influential than easily influenced. Her rebellious nature was evident even before the revolution, as she had the courage to marry a man vastly different from her and attempt to adapt to life in Switzerland, a process that required bravery. However, she never fully felt at home there.<sup>18</sup> Upon returning to Iran, she found

<sup>16</sup>Cathleen J. Hamann, “Ladies on the Tramp: The Philanthropic Flâneuse and Appropriations of Victorian London’s Impoverished Domesticity,” in *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space*, eds. Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 65-83.

<sup>17</sup>For Iranian women’s contribution to the Iran-Iraq war, see Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>MOOOV, “Q&A Firouzeh Khosrovani – ‘Radiograph of a Family’,” YouTube, posted May 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmx-hc5Ftn9k>.

empowerment through the Islamic system, which allowed her to fulfill her aspirations and granted her both a social and professional identity. While the common narrative suggests that the revolution confined all women to the home, for some, it provided a newfound sense of security and confidence, enabling them to engage in public life in ways they never had before.



Figure 25: Khusruvānī's mother as school principal A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādīyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Firūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:03:49).

Contrary to the perception that the revolution entirely restricted women's social and professional participation, it granted a significant role to religious and traditionalist women. Many found a space within public institutions and felt more comfortable in these environments due to the Islamization of public life. Educated and actively engaged in the workforce, they helped shape the new social order.

In contrast, the revolution increasingly constrained Khusruvānī's father's freedom, role, and identity. As she narrates in the film, her father could no longer protest, as an entire government was behind her mother. As the revolution progresses, images of the father become increasingly scarce in the film, while the mother's presence dominates—mirroring both the transformation of the family album and the diminishing of the father's

social role. The narrator reflects:

Mother's world was now larger. In this new world, she had friends just like her—sharing the same passion, the same words, the same way of dressing. She had become a full revolutionary Muslim. Soon, my mother replaced a teacher who had been dismissed by the revolutionaries. She was so committed and loyal that she became the school principal. The school became her main home.



Figure 26: Khusruvānī's mother, seated at the center, with her friends during one of their outings. A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādiyugrāphī-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Fīrūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:03:01).

The juxtaposition of the father's concern over the mother's absence with images of her active engagement in public life underscores a profound shift in gender roles and power structures within post-revolutionary Iran. While the father's diminishing presence reflects the broader marginalization of secular men within the newly established Islamic order, the mother's increasing visibility signals the empowerment of religious women who aligned themselves with the revolution's ideological framework. Her participation in work, public speeches, and travel with colleagues is not merely a personal transformation but a reflection of the broader social restructuring that granted some women unprecedented mobility and influence—albeit with-

in the parameters of the state's religious and political agenda.

The sequence reaches its most striking moment in the military camp, where women pass bullets to one another, preparing for combat. This imagery challenges conventional perceptions of female roles within the Islamic Republic, complicating the notion that the revolution solely confined women to the domestic sphere. Instead, it reveals how certain women gained access to militarized and politicized spaces, reinforcing the idea that the revolution did not affect all women uniformly. The father's dismissive remark, "She has gone on a trip," about her military training is laden with irony. His attempt to minimize the gravity of her absence masks a deeper reality: while he is relegated to the private sphere, his wife is actively shaping the new ideological landscape. Women clad in black fire rifles against a backdrop of gunfire, demonstrating how the mother's role—and by extension, the role of revolutionary women—was redefined. The state's ideological framework allowed women to transgress traditional spatial boundaries, but only in ways that served the broader goals of the revolution and war effort.



Figure 27: Women at a military training camp during the Iran–Iraq War. A still from the film *Radiograph of a Family* (*Rādiyugrāph-i yak khānavādah*), directed by Fīrūzah Khusruvānī, 2020. Accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCdfxBnC8_o) (00:01:21).



A soft piano rendition of one of the most famous Iran-Iraq war songs plays over this scene. Although the lyrics are absent, the melody alone conveys its original message, invoking themes of martyrdom and duty by referring to Iranians as the army of the Imam of the Time and calling them to prepare for relentless battle. This moment exemplifies the film's creative use of sound, layering the narrative with an auditory effect that heightens the emotional intensity of the wartime imagery. For those who lived through or grew up during the war, the melody serves as a deeply evocative and haunting reminder of that era, reinforcing the film's ability to connect personal memory with national history.<sup>19</sup>

However, the film does not offer a simplified depiction of ideological opposition between the mother and father. Khusruvānī criticizes Western interpretations that attempt to frame them as symbols of secular modernity versus religious fundamentalism. She argues that such reductionist analyses lead to polarization.<sup>20</sup> Instead, she portrays her parents as individuals shaped by their times. Her father's embrace of secularism, art, and parties was not just personal preference but a reflection of the broader social climate of his era before the Revolution. Similarly, her mother's revolutionary fervor gained legitimacy through the Islamic framework that came to dominate post-revolutionary Iran.

Through its masterful use of sound, imagery, and juxtaposition, *Radiograph of a Family* not only reconstructs a deeply personal history but also reflects the broader transformations that shaped post-revolutionary Iran. By layering individual memory with collective experience, the film challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood and resistance, illustrating the complex ways in which ideological shifts redefined gender roles and social structures. In doing so, it highlights how the revolution simultaneously expanded and constrained opportunities, creating new forms of agency for some women while marginalizing others. Ultimately, the film invites viewers to consider how political upheavals do not just reshape nations—they also fracture and

<sup>19</sup>To view the original war mourning song 'O Army of the Lord of the Time, Be Prepared,' performed by Sādiq Āhangarān and juxtaposed with images from the battlefield, see Montazareen e khatam ul aameha.a.s, "Āhangarān, Ay lashkar-i sāhib zamān," YouTube, posted October 02, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km0pwWI-4I7U&list=RDkm0pwWI-4I7U&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km0pwWI-4I7U&list=RDkm0pwWI-4I7U&start_radio=1).

<sup>20</sup>MOOOV, "Q&A Firouzeh Khosrovani – 'Radiograph of a Family'," YouTube, posted May 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmx-hc5Fn9k>.

redefine the most intimate spaces of family and home.

## **Conclusion**

While legal, religious, and cultural forces shape women's freedom of movement in Iran, these constraints are neither uniform nor absolute. This article has demonstrated how Iranian cinema captures the negotiation of space as a contested process, revealing both the barriers imposed on women's mobility and the ways they navigate and resist them. These films challenge rigid spatial binaries—public versus private, male versus female—by illustrating the fluid, lived realities of space and the ongoing struggle to define and redefine it.

Some restrictions, such as male guardianship laws, directly curtail women's ability to travel and access opportunities, while others are more paradoxical, as Islamized public spaces have created new avenues for social and professional participation. The contradictions of gendered mobility in Iran reveal that space is not merely restricted but also reconfigured, expanding for some while narrowing for others based on class, religious adherence, and social status.

While cases like *Radiograph of a Family* demonstrate moments when gender hierarchies are reversed, these remain exceptions. Legal and informal controls on women's transgression of space remain deeply entrenched, reinforcing patriarchal norms that dictate access to mobility. However, Iranian women continue to resist, whether through legal advocacy, personal defiance, or the simple act of moving in spaces they are expected to avoid.

Yet, not all forms of restriction come from legal mandates—social norms and invisible boundaries often exert the most effective control. Challenging these norms requires more than legislative change; it requires reshaping the cultural narratives that sustain them. This is where cinema plays a transformative role—not only reflecting lived experiences but actively shaping how mobility, gender, and space are imagined. These struggles



are evolving in contemporary Iranian cinema and digital spaces, where new forms of resistance, negotiation, and visibility are emerging.