Voice of Resistance

Female Singers in Post-revolutionary Iran after 1979

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Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, solo singing by women has been officially prohibited in Iran. Over the past 46 years, female vocalists have persistently confronted this restriction, devising new strategies to sing, articulate their artistic identities, and sustain their professional careers. The strategies employed to resist this ban have evolved in parallel with Iran's dynamic social and cultural transformations. Drawing on an interview with a young female singer currently active in Iran, this article examines how the younger generation negotiates these constraints through their determination and collaborative efforts. collaboration between men and women who play various roles: as singers, audience members, ensemble musicians, teachers, venue owners, etc. These signal a hopeful outlook for the future of female singers in Iran.

Introduction

For 46 years, successive generations of women have developed diverse approaches to circumvent these restrictions and maintain their artistic presence. As an Iranian musician who studied music in Iran and was active as an instrumentalist in various ensembles and music groups, I feel compelled to address the situation of women in Iran, particularly this significant ban on solo singing. This article first examines women's efforts and activities in resisting the singing ban and then analyses the situation of the younger generation. Through understanding how evolving culture, society, and generational changes affect women's efforts in confronting this prohibition, this research offers insights for future generations. In my article I attempt to answer the following key question: Which strategies do women use to overcome the ban based on their practice, and what are young generation's attitudes and approaches? Through examination of their activities and performances, we can understand that young generations, while building upon strategies used by previous generations and following established paths, are also implementing new ideas. We also see how collaboration among people (both women and men) makes these ideas possible—individuals serving in roles such as singing teachers, owners of specific performance venues, and musical accompanists such as instrumentalists.

Women's Musical Practice in 19th and 20th century Iran

Women's singing and musical performance in Iran has undergone significant transformations across different political and historical periods. I would like to briefly explain Iran's political system before and after the 1979 Revolution, as this transformation significantly affected the status of female singers.

Iran operated under a monarchy system for a long period (2,500 years). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the country was ruled by the Qajar dynasty that included seven different kings from 1789 to 1921.[1] The Persian Constitutional Revolution occurred from 1905 to 1911, and following a 1921 coup, Reza Shah Pahlavi seized power from the weakened Qajar rulers and established the Pahlavi dynasty. The second Pahlavi era was established under Mohammad Reza Shah. The Pahlavi dynasty marked a significant turning point for women vocalists in Iran. Some researchers, such as Camron Amin, have titled the late nineteenth century as the beginning of "modern Iran" and argued that the imagination of modern "womanhood" became a prominent topic in the press.[2] During this period, women could contribute to different fields more than in the past, including Iranian music.[3]

Following this long era of monarchy, the 1979 Revolution turned the country into an Islamic republic. With the establishment of Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, the political system underwent fundamental changes. Major political institutions in Iran now include the office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the office of the President, and the Iranian Parliament *(Majlis).* Each institution plays a role in conceptualizing Iran as an Islamic state, with their functions and limitations outlined in the Iranian Constitution. The Constitution recognizes Islam as a comprehensive way of life that serves as the basis of government and regulates both worship and society.[4]

The Islamic Constitution, written under Ayatollah Khomeini's guidance, included new rules that had not previously existed, such as the ban on solo singing for women and mandatory hijab wearing. Another important aspect to mention, concerns the factions within the Islamic Republic: Hardliners and reformists. While fundamental rules remain fixed, different presidential periods have created varying atmospheres and policy implementations.[5]

Post 1979 Revolution

The progression came to an abrupt halt with the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Following the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini declared music *haram* (religiously forbidden), a radical position that fundamentally changed music and artists' lives in Iran. Ameneh Yousefzadeh, an Iranian ethnomusicologist, references

1 See Herman Pelani and Hasaruddin, "The Political History of Iran: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic", in: *Journal of Research and Multidisciplinary* 6/1 (2023), pp. 702–707.

2 See Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2002, p. 116f.

3 See Pouya Nekouei, "Gender and Singing in Pahlavi Soundscape: Modern Feminine Culture and Masculine Politics in the Age of Popular Culture, Vision, and Rumours; A Discussion of Sensory History in Modern Iran", in: *Iranian Studies* 57/4 (2024), pp. 560–597, here p. 563.

4 See Megan Bradley, "Political Islam, Political Institutions and Civil Society in Iran: A Literature Review" [2007], <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/98399469-38a8-4c7c-9ed4-146b1fd5ec49/content> (23.10.2025), p. 9.

5 See Sepideh Raissadat, "A Case Study of a Rumor in the Cyberspace: The Evolution of Views on Female Vocalists in Iran", in: *Global–Digital–Medial: Musik in transkulturellen/traditionellen Räumen und Kontexten. Bericht über die Jahrestagung des ICTM Deutschland 2019*, ed. by Edda Brandes, Ralf Martin Jäger and Dorit Klebe, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag 2019, pp. 221–238, here p. 221.

one of Khomeini's speeches about music in her article "The Situation of Music in Iran Since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations":

> "Music is like a drug; whoever acquires the habit can no longer devote himself to important activities. It changes people to the point of yielding to vice or to preoccupations pertaining to the world of music alone. We must eliminate music because it means betraying our country and our youth. We must eliminate it."[6]

Following this declaration, music disappeared from radio and television. However, the implementation of restrictions in other musical fields remained unclear during the transitional period before the new constitution was established. Regarding the timeline after the revolution, Parmis Mozafari, Iranian Ethnomusicologist in her article "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing in Post-Revolution Iran" noted: "This ban did not commence on an exact date after the revolution; it appeared rather as occasional disruptions of performances before it was announced as a rule."[7] After the establishment of the republican system, decisions regarding concerts, albums, and artistic programs were delegated to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Yousefzadeh mentioned in her article, that crucial aspect of this system is the requirement for government permits for all musical activities. Musicians must obtain permission (*mojavez*) from the state before engaging in any musical practices.[8]

Consequently, artistic activities became directly dependent on the opinions of individuals within this ministry, creating uncertainty about whether activities would be completely banned or partially permitted. Sepideh Raeissadat, an Iranian ethnomusicologist and professional singer, observes: "Almost four decades on, the ruling is still enforced with more or less zeal, depending on the conservatism or liberalism of different administrations."[9] As mentioned earlier, Iran's political system has consistently featured two major factions: hardliners and reformists. Different presidential periods have created varying policy implementations. One particularly significant period was the Khatami presidency, which notably impacted Iran's artistic fields and artists' activities. During this time, the process of obtaining permission for musical programs and concerts became easier than before, and women could access more spaces for singing.[10] Even though solo singing remained banned, Saeed Kamali Dehghan notes in his article that the reason lies in the claim of conservative clerics: "Women's voices have the potential to trigger immoral sensual – or kinetic – arousal."[11] Nevertheless, female musicians developed strategies to overcome this prohibition and to continue performing, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

6 Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations", in: *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9/2 (2000), pp. 35–61, here: p. 44, cited in "Radio and Television must strengthen the young", in: *Keyhān* 1 Mordad 1358/1979.

7 Parmis Mozafari, "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing in Post-Revolution Iran", in: *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures*, ed. by Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy, London/New York: Routledge 2013 (= Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures), pp. 262–278, here p. 263.

8 See Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution" (like fn. 6), p. 44.

9 Raissadat, "A Case Study of a Rumor in the Cyberspace" (like fn. 5), p. 221.

10 See Mozafari, "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing" (like fn. 7), p. 266.

11 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Alone Again, Naturally: Women Singing in Iran", in: *The Guardian*, 29 August 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/aug/29/women-singing-islamic-republic-iran> (04.10.2025).

Strategies of Resistance

Faced with this ban and the difficulties of performing music in Post-1979 Revolution Iran, some artists, as part of the Iranian diaspora, decided to emigrate to other countries where they could continue their artistic careers. A prominent example among female artists is Googoosh (b. 1950), Iran's most famous pop star, who had been performing since her childhood until the revolution. After 1979, she remained in Iran and refrained from singing for twenty years before eventually deciding to emigrate, following the path of many of her colleagues. Meanwhile, other singers who decided to stay in Iran began developing strategies to overcome the singing ban while remaining in their homeland. Parmis Mozafari has documented these strategies in detail within specific timelines, particularly focusing on the immediate post-revolutionary period. Singing in mixed choirs was one of the first strategies women adopted to return to the stage and maintain their vocal presence, even though their individual voices were often masked by male singers, whose numbers typically exceeded standard choral proportions. Also, most of these choirs performed at revolutionary and political events with mostly religious themes and repertoire.[12]

Another strategy that was initiated in the early 1990s, which musicians found to be an effective way to overcome the ban on solo singing, was co-singing. Co-singing (*hamkhāni*) is a collaboration of women and men singers, where women are allowed to sing alongside men, as their voices must be combined with men's voices. Musicians across different styles—pop, classical, and folk music—welcomed this approach enthusiastically.[13] Co-singing became an important strategy for women's musical resistance in many ways: Initially also being problematic for obtaining permits, after considerable effort by musicians, through repeated negotiations with the Ministry of Culture and Guidance, and by convincing them that Co-singing does not allow the female voice to be heard on its own, it became possible to have one male solo singer with two or more female singers as co-singers, and subsequently to experiment with other combinations. However, this issue has been constantly changing, depending on who has served as the head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.[14] For example, during a reformist era, of the Khatami presidency, only one female and one male singer could sing together. Mozafari also mentions that there have been a few cases in which two women without men have been allowed to sing together.[15] Co-singing as a strategy to win back their voice offered female artists more creative space compared to singing in choirs, allowing them to express their art and identity. In this sense, it was a particularly significant step, as female singers could, be it only for brief moments, sing as solo performers. As Mozafari observed: "In some cases, their male co-singers restrain their voices to allow them to sing more clearly. In the concert of Shams Ensemble in August 2008, for instance, on several occasions, each time for a few seconds, the female singer, Najmeh Tajadod sang solo."[16]

On the other hand, even to this day, multiple artists' experiences demonstrate the ongoing challenges facing both female and male musicians who employ these strategies. Sometimes, depending on the circumstances, female singers or the ensemble leader (whether male or female) have to face

12 See Mozafari, "Carving a Space for Female Solo Singing" (like fn. 7), p. 263.

13 See ibid, p. 264.

14 See ibid.

15 See ibid.

16 Ibid.

consequences. I have a personal experience that reflect these kinds of challenges: When I performed with a music ensemble called *Neyestan*, we held several concerts in different halls, all with official permits. Our performances featured one female and one male singer, and our repertoire always included co-singing between the two vocalists. The ensemble's male composer and leader, Koroush Matin, deliberately composed and arranged songs to give both singers independent musical characters rather than relegating one to an accompaniment role. However, in one concert in 2019, Matin was banned from working after our performance. Despite having a permit, the organization claimed that the female voice was louder than the male singer's voice. This demonstrates how music groups are confronted with subjective preferences and views of individuals working for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. As previously mentioned, the licensing process and concert approval depend entirely on the Ministry's decisions. Furthermore, this situation shows that these decisions can have significant consequences for musicians even after their performances.

Voice alteration represents another approach for women to perform publicly. Female artists could sing by modifying their voices in two different ways: The first method involved changing the voice to resemble a child's voice, which was used for children songs; The second technique involved shifting to soprano singing in film music or background music. The first documented use of this approach was by Hossein Alizadeh in his music for the film *Delshodegan* by Ali Hatami, creating a nostalgic effect.[17]

Another strategy involved performing in private settings. These concerts were held in large residences or other private venues without obtaining state permits and were attended exclusively by trusted individuals, such as friends and family.[18] Although this approach offered opportunities for women to sing and experiment as solo artists with other musicians, it had significant limitations: Restricted audiences, limited venues, often non-standard acoustical spaces, and no financial compensation.

I believe all these strategies represent women's efforts, urges, and resistance against the ban—and, above all, this resistance is continuing. It is a long path that has not yet been walked to the end, paved by female singers since 1979, where generation after generation walk upon and move forward.

Generational Shifts in Approach and Attitude

Since the prohibition for female singers persists, multiple generations have experienced and continue to face challenges in pursuing their musical careers. During these 46 years of prohibition, technology, culture, and social dynamics have been changing. The strategies reviewed above form the foundation for the younger generation—in this paper, the younger generation refers specifically to people who were born between 1980–2017—that was born during the ban years, grew up in Iran under the rules of the Islamic Constitution, and are now at an age where they desire to sing but are not permitted to do so. Consequently, they have developed additional strategies to make the female voice hearable.

Presenting Female Musicianship in Social Media

17 See ibid., p. 265.

18 See ibid.

The rise and rapid development of social media, recording technologies, and music production tools represent a significant opportunity for the younger generation—a completely different space that women immediately after the revolution did not have access to. As Axel Bruns mentions in his book *The Social Media Handbook*, artists curate their online presence through posts, videos, and interactions, constructing a digital persona that reflects their artistic identity and resonates with followers.[19]

Social media offers new possibilities for Iranian musicians and each platform could be examined separately as a tool for artists for sharing artistic activities and expressing their (musical) identity. However, the separate examination of each platform is not the focus of this paper, therefore I will discuss only two important and widely used social media platforms: *Instagram* and *YouTube*. These two platforms are used more than other platforms by female singers in Iran to express their solo singing. As a musician, I have a large community of Iranian musicians across different social media fields, and I see that women singers, particularly the young generation, use these platforms for showing their talent, ideas, and singing. In their Instagram accounts, we can see their individual music practices and sometimes performances with accompaniment of instrumentalists. In social media, they can also wear their own desired clothes and choose whether or not to wear hijab according to their own preference.

YouTube serves a similar function for female musicians. A particularly creative and innovative example in this field is the "Imaginary Concert" by Parastoo Ahmadi. This music video was recorded in a historical location in Tehran with accompaniment by male instrumentalists. Ahmadi appeared in attire that directly contravened Islamic and political regulations in Iran. The performance featured songs with political, social, and poetic themes. Although this performance had no live audience, Ahmadi performed as if conducting a live concert, creating an atmosphere for YouTube viewers that demonstrated what such performances might look like on Iranian stages if they were permitted—a live concert experience rendered "imaginary" by political constraints. She posted this music video on her YouTube channel and it received positive reception. It has 2,812,689 views on *YouTube*[20] (by September 2025).

Small-Scale Illegal Concerts

Before examining this strategy in detail, it is essential to distinguish it from underground concerts to clarify why it represents a specifically contemporary approach employed by younger generations. While concerts in private spaces have existed since the early years after the revolution, risk-taking through intimate venues, represents an evolved form of resistance with distinct characteristics.

Both concert formats share one fundamental similarity: Performers do not obtain official permits (*mojavez*) from government authorities, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, significant differences distinguish these approaches: Concerts in private spaces typically occur in completely private locations with exclusively private audiences, usually consisting of the performers' friends, colleagues, or close acquaintances. These events operate within tight, trusted social circles and are similar to private gatherings but with live musical performances, often without any advertising such as concert posters. Small-scale

19 See Axel Bruns et al., *The Social Media Handbook*, London: Routledge 2014, p. 45f.

20 See Parastoo Ahmadi, "Karvansara Concert" [2024], <https://youtu.be/oYcaDHEnhbU?si=OrHjhEkguzvArbra> (04.10.2025).

illegal concerts, by contrast, involve performances in semi-public cultural institutes. These venues sell tickets for concerts and performances and publish promotional materials, but again without direct permits from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Having experience in performing concerts in such institutes, I am familiar with this process. These institutes hold permits for operating as cultural institutions and describe their activities to the Ministry as general cultural activities. While they have authorization for general cultural activities, workshops, and concerts, they do not obtain separate permits for individual performances (unlike the process required for concerts in established concert halls). Consequently, each concert or performance carries inherent risks, as Ministry officials who determine that the programming does not conform to their regulations can close the institution entirely.

Case Study Selection: Fatima Torabi at *Roob-e-roo* Cultural Institute

In the following analysis I focus on Fatima Torabi's solo performance at *Roob-e-roo* Cultural Institute. This case study was selected for several methodological reasons: First, my familiarity with the institute through personal experience performing there provides insider insight into its operations; second, the institute's role in facilitating this resistance strategy can be thoroughly examined; third, the performance featured a female solo singer who directly challenged the prohibition by not wearing hijab during the concert, making the entire situation more risky for the performers; fourth, Fatima Torabi and the kamanche player who accompanied her, performed a music program that included songs about women and hijab, presenting a concert that focused specifically on women's situations in both its repertoire and thematic content. Access to the performer through direct interviews provides primary source testimony essential for a comprehensive analysis. The concert was performed on 23 January 2025 at the *Roo-be-roo* Cultural Institute in Tehran, in a hall with approximately 90 seats, and lasted for approximately one hour.[21]

To understand the context of this concert, it is essential to examine *Roob-e-roo* Institute not merely as a performance venue, but as part of a broader support ecosystem. Both my analysis and Fatima's testimony from our interview reveal that behind the institute stands a network of individuals—led by the institute's head and encompassing a dedicated group—who share progressive social ideologies and actively support such cultural activities. This support structure demonstrates that individual musicians or music groups cannot take on the risks of illegal concerts without institutional backing and community solidarity.

According to the institute's official website, *Roob-e-roo* defines itself as follows:

> "Rooberoo Mansion is a cultural hub founded in 2016 located in Tehran, Iran. Established initially in one of the oldest mansions in the Valiasr District in Central Tehran, after 8 years of activity, Rooberoo defines itself as both a physical and a conceptual space to interact and face new ideas and initiate

21 See Interview with Fatima Torabi, conducted by Parmis Rahmani, July 2025.

> new conversations. This space has expanded itself, both conceptually across different fields and internationally through intercultural exchange and also physically across Tehran."[22]

This mission statement reveals several key elements that facilitate the risk-taking strategy: The institute positions itself as a space for "new ideas" and "new conversations" suggesting an openness to challenging conventional boundaries. The emphasis on both "physical and conceptual space" indicates that the venue serves not only as a location but as an ideological platform. Furthermore, the mention of expansion "across different fields" and "internationally through intercultural exchange" indicates the institute's commitment to pushing beyond traditional cultural limitations.

However, the most severe consequences of this act of resistance could fall upon the woman in this case: Fatima Torabi, who performed as a solo singer without the required hijab. She introduced herself as a feminist. When I asked her about that concert, she explained that the motivation for this concert was initially centred on the concept of "women". Regarding her idea and collaboration with kamancheh player she said that the subject of feminism brought them together as friends and then as colleagues for making music. They started talking to each other on social media about feminism, and after the *Jin Jiyan Azadi* movement,[23] they decided to create a music program about women. They selected songs from the classical Persian repertoire with lyrics about women, the hijab and feminist themes.

I asked her about the details of this concert, including the selection of songs, the use of *Saz-o-Avaz*—that is an Iranian classical non-metric music combining vocal "questions" with instrumental "responses"—, and particularly about the main concept and ideas behind them. Torabi explained that they selected songs about women from the Iranian classical repertoire that had been composed previously, and also expressing their creativity and ideas through the form of *Saz-o-Avaz* based on poetry. In the process of selecting poetry for their program, Torabi discovered the female author and poet Zhale Ghaem Maghami (b. 1884). After reading her feminist poems and learning more about her fascinating and tragic life as one of Iran's first feminists in a patriarchal society, Torabi decided to create a *Saz-o-Avaz* based on her poetry with the assistance of her singing teacher, Mehdi Emami.[24] Asking specifically about the consequences they might have faced, she explained that their concert was performed without any problems, but shortly after, when another more popular female singer performed a similar concert in the venue, the police arrested her and the owner of the *Roob-e-roo* institute after just one song. Following this concert, the *Roob-e-roo* cultural institute was closed for months. This pattern of performing in cultural institutes without explicit permits, as demonstrated by multiple artists including Fatima Torabi and other female singers, represents an approach employed by younger generations to circumvent official restrictions while maintaining public access to their music—effectively using these venues as spaces of resistance.

22 RooBeRoo Mansion, "Performing Arts Platform: A Collection of Events in the Arts and Other Sciences", <https://www.rooberoo.art/> (17.08.2025).

23 The murder of Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman in Tehran on 16 September 2022, while in the custody of the Islamic Republic's morality police (Gasht-e-Ershad), prompted an uprising across Iran, known by the Kurdish slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" (Women, Life, Freedom). See Ahmad Mohammadpour, "Decolonizing Voices from Rojhelat: Gender-Othering, Ethnic Erasure, and the Politics of Intersectionality in Iran", in: *Critical Sociology* 50/1 (2024), pp. 85–106.

24 See Interview with Fatima Torabi (like fn. 21).

On the other hand, it is important to note that these activities result from good collaborations among women singers, with support from a group of men and women as institute directors and backing from male and female musicians as accompanists and music teachers. Again, it is important to state that past strategies for women to musically raise their voices paved the way for young generations and new strategies. Nevertheless, there are considerable differences between them that can be summarized as follows: Some of the young generation of female singers accept more risk for overcoming the ban and asserting their existence; young generations may pay attention to performance details (in Torabi's concert these details include the selection of lyrics and poems and not wearing hijab) to convey their protests and social and political observations. It seems as if they do not want to just sing and perform music, but they want to protest and 'voice' their demands. Perhaps this is because they have faced bans from the first day they decided to sing. And it comes with discovering their reality: Singing, in their society, is an active political act—unfortunately—, not just an artistic activity.

Conclusion

Women have played a significant and active role in the history of Iranian music, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries. Following the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, solo singing by women was officially banned—a prohibition that profoundly disrupted the lives and careers of professional female musicians. Some chose emigration as a way to continue their artistic work within the diaspora; others remained in Iran, seeking alternative spaces and strategies to preserve their artistic identity. Across the last 46 years, generation after generation of women have developed diverse strategies to circumvent the ban and reclaim their voices. Despite facing serious consequences, they have never ceased their efforts.

Today, newer generations of women—those born under the Islamic Republic who have only experienced the prohibition of solo singing—continue to challenge these restrictions with renewed determination. Technological advances, cultural shifts, and personal collaborations have opened unprecedented avenues for musical expression that differ markedly from earlier periods. Through an interview Fatima Torabi, this study examined contemporary approaches to musical expression within the ongoing constraints of the ban. While younger artists build upon the paths forged by their predecessors, closer examination reveals a distinctive shift: Many now view singing not merely as an art form but as an explicit social and political act of resistance—a conscious assertion of their right to sing.

We can hear the voices of this new generation of female singers, and in this achievement, we witness collaboration between men and women who play various roles: as singers, audience members, ensemble musicians, teachers, venue owners, etc. It is this attitude and these collaborations that send the hopeful message that in the future, we will hear louder voices of resistance.

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As an Iranian female musician, I have personally experienced this resistance, which compelled me to explore this subject more deeply. During my second semester as an ethnomusicology student at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, I enrolled in the seminar "Gender in

Ethnomusicology", taught by Ass.-Prof. Mag. Dr. phil. Anja Brunner. Her warm encouragement and support inspired me to delve further into this topic. I recognized that the situation of female singers in Iran was profoundly relevant to the themes discussed in the seminar, and I was motivated to investigate it more thoroughly and develop it into this essay.