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The Effect of Music on Women in Non-Western Countries

Introduction

Throughout history—and still today—restrictions have been placed on music. The ability to perform or listen to whatever we choose, which might be assumed a basic freedom, is often limited and replaced with music deemed “acceptable” by a nation’s political or cultural authorities. While this topic can lead in many directions, I will specifically focus on how music has affected women. In many non-Western societies, women have used music as a means of negotiating power, transforming it from a tool of patriarchal control into a platform for resistance, self-expression, and social change.

Iran

To begin, in Iran, women were viewed as “a source of sexual temptation...manipulators whose power is limitless” (Youssefzadeh 129). Because women were seen as a manipulative threat, music and many forms of artistic expression were restricted or banned for them. The only instance in which women were allowed to sing—without facing punishment—was when their voices were blended into a dominant male choir. In this arrangement, it became “impossible to distinguish...the woman’s voice,” effectively drowning it out (Youssefzadeh 129). Silencing her

voice in this way was intended to limit women's presence and influence, ensuring they would not be perceived as a distraction to men.

In the U.S., such restrictions may seem extreme, but within the historical context of the Islamic world, "prostitution had gone hand in hand with public entertainment in the form of singing and dancing" (Youssefzadeh 130). For this reason, some viewed these regulations as morally justified according to inherited cultural and religious beliefs. However, this logic is deeply flawed, as it is rooted entirely in male perceptions and fears. Rather than questioning women's participation in music, a more critical question arises: why was women's artistic expression so readily associated with immorality, and why were men's reactions used to justify women's silence?

As a result of women being prohibited from performing in Iran, many turned to forms of musical defiance such as private recording, sharing music on social media, or participating in underground performance networks. According to Heather Rastovac, "the very intention of abolishing music in public life unexpectedly led to increasing practices of music"(Rastovac 66).

One of the most notable figures in this underground musical resistance was Googoosh. During the Iranian Revolution, she was banned from performing and eventually forced into exile. However, this exile motivated her to continue her work by producing "bootleg recordings and videos," allowing her to maintain—and even expand—her audience (Britannica, par. 3). In her song "[*Behesht*](#)" ("Heaven"), Googoosh openly advocated for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, strengthening her legacy as a symbol of resistance against gender oppression. Through both her

music and her perseverance, Googoosh demonstrated how women used artistic expression to challenge cultural limitations and assert their autonomy.

Afghanistan

For the people of Afghanistan—both men and women—who lived under the Taliban’s rule, life existed without the presence of music. Musical instruments were seen as immoral, which caused many people to feel the need to destroy their possessions before the Taliban did. In an article written by Sarah Dawood, she includes a quote from Waheedullah Saghar stating, “It was too risky to keep instruments at home. Many of my colleagues also felt forced to destroy their instruments, and we disposed of the broken pieces in the garbage to protect ourselves” (Dawood par. 2). All people of Afghanistan suffered from the lack of music, feeling as if they were villains for expressing a basic right they should have been granted. It is important to acknowledge that every person experienced the Taliban’s wrath; however, here I will focus solely on its effect on women.

Much like the regimes implemented in Iran, the silencing of women’s voices was considered common. A law implemented by the Afghan government states that “a woman’s voice is deemed intimate and so should not be heard singing, reciting, or reading aloud in public” (CNN par. 4). Because of the laws placed on them, many women took matters into their own hands—fleeing the country, escaping into exile, or performing their music in underground settings to keep Afghan culture alive.

One example is the ANIM, or Afghan National Institute of Music. The Zohra Orchestra was an all-female ensemble formed by ANIM in response to the Taliban’s control. This orchestra

included many girls from orphanages and from the streets, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusiveness. As the orchestra developed, “one of [their] main successes so far was being able to show to the world a positive image of Afghanistan and its culture. This orchestra has been supported by several countries and is also known as the ‘Angels of Music’” (Karimi par. 11). The orchestra aimed to revive Afghanistan’s musical culture—which had been severely constrained under previous regimes—and to promote women’s inclusion in music. Zohra provided not only musical training but also social transformation, giving young women opportunities previously unavailable in Afghanistan. However, after the Taliban regained control in 2021, Zohra was shut down. Still, the orchestra left behind a powerful legacy, showing that women stood up for what they believed in and continued to resist oppressive regimes while supporting one another through the unifying power of music.

Conclusion

Unfortunately women in many countries still face this sort of musical oppression, including many other forms of oppression. The stories of women in Iran and Afghanistan reveal that music is far more than sound—it is freedom, identity, and resistance. When regimes silence women’s voices, they are not merely banning melodies; they are suppressing the human spirit and the cultural heartbeat of a nation. Yet even in the face of censorship, exile, and violence, countless women continue to sing, compose, and play in secret or abroad, turning music into a quiet act of defiance. Their courage reminds the world that art cannot be entirely muted, no matter how repressive the system. Each forbidden song, each whispered performance, becomes a testimony to endurance and the universal longing for expression. The oppression these women

endure underscores the deep connection between gender, culture, and freedom—but it also illuminates an unbreakable resilience that transcends borders. As global audiences listen and amplify their voices, they participate in a collective resistance to silence. Ultimately, the fight of Iranian and Afghan women for the right to make music is not just about art—it is about reclaiming humanity, agency, and the simple yet radical right to be heard.

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