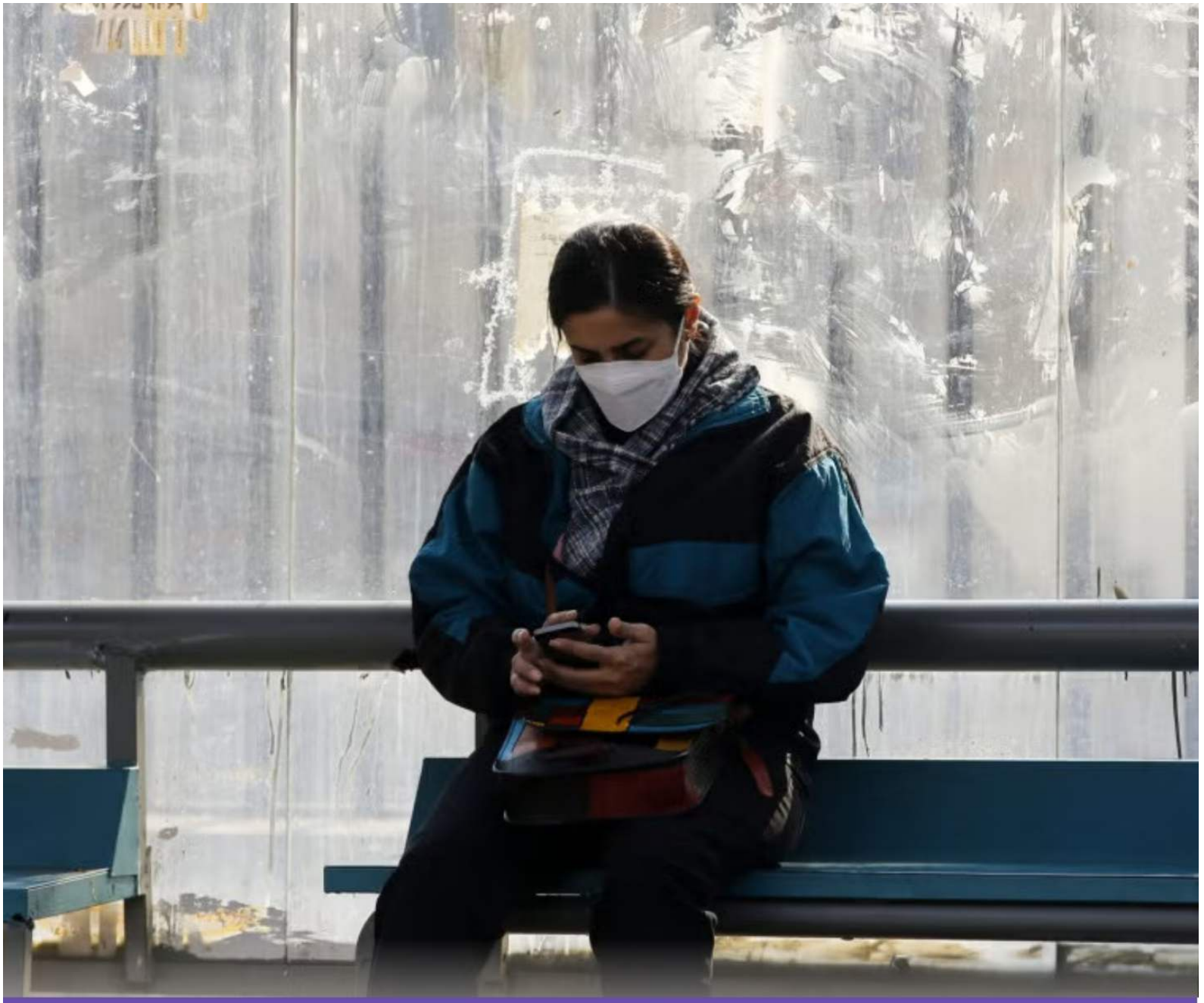

Femena
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Internet Shutdowns in Iran and the Gendered Experience of Digital Isolation

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Over the past several months, Iran has once again experienced widespread internet disruptions and shutdowns. For many people inside the country, this is no longer an exceptional event, but part of a familiar political pattern since the Iranian authorities have previously restricted internet access when the country has experienced unrest. Some examples include the nationwide protests that started in November 2019, as well as the "Woman Life Freedom" uprising that began in September 2022 – in both cases the government imposed a shutdown of the internet.

However, this most recent episode of digital blackout was different in both scale and intensity. In the previous examples, the shutdowns usually lasted for days or weeks at most, and people were able to eventually regain access through VPNs and other circumvention tools. This time, however, many Iranians describe a much more intricate and layered form of digital restriction: severe filtering, disruption of VPN services, extremely slow domestic internet, and, consequently, blocked access to major global platforms including Google services, email providers, messaging apps, and social media. Technically, the internet was not shut down altogether, but for many ordinary users it became practically unusable.

The authorities in Iran have justified these restrictions through security rationales. They argue that shut downs are necessary measures – especially during moments of regional tension and war – against espionage, sabotage, or foreign influence. Yet for many Iranians, especially after previous experiences with repeated blackouts, these restrictions are understood as part of a broader system of control and digital silencing.

International coverage has also noted that within Iran, there has emerged a system of unequal access to the internet. Reports of expensive forms of so-called "professional internet" or limited high-quality access available mainly to businesses and affluent users have circulated widely. Professional internet refers to special mobile internet packages offered mostly to companies, traders, and large online businesses. At the same time, VPNs and internet configurations that still operate are very rare, often extremely expensive and also unstable. This has led to increasingly unequal, class-based access to the internet in a country already struggling with inflation and grave economic crises.

The significance of this lies in the fact that, as with most places across the planet, internet access in Iran is not simply about entertainment or convenience. Millions of Iranians depend on the internet and on online connection for their daily work, education, emotional survival and political life. And more importantly, this dependency is not experienced equally.

In particular, for many women and queer people in Iran, the internet is one of the few spaces that grants them some degree of autonomy. Restrictions on mobility, unequal access to public space, discrimination in employment, family control, and the risks attached to queer visibility all shape how digital spaces are used. Against this backdrop, online platforms have functioned not only as workplaces, but also as spaces for friendship, political discussion, emotional support, identity formation, and collective survival.

This brief report draws on the experiences of women and queer people in Iran to examine how internet shutdowns reshape their everyday lives. The report highlights how digital restrictions are not gender-neutral and how they directly affect economic survival, mental health, social belonging, and the ability to organize politically.

Economic Survival and Digital Work

Women in Iran already face major structural barriers in the labor market. Low rates of employment, wage inequality, mandatory hijab regulations, ideological hiring processes, family pressure, unpaid domestic labor, and unsafe work environments all limit their access to stable jobs.

For many women and queer people, the internet became a space offering a partial alternative to these restrictions. Significant numbers of people could utilize the internet to launch freelance careers in fields such as teaching, graphic design, translation, editing, digital art, small, often home-based businesses (using social media platforms like Instagram), content production, and other remote work. These types of opportunities were often unavailable in offline, traditional workplaces.

Despite the fact that freelance work is often subject to precarity and usually lacks legal protection or insurance, for many people it offers something crucial: income, relative autonomy, and distance from unsafe workplaces or controlling family environments.

Haney, a 27-year-old online English teacher from a small town in the north of Iran, says the shutdown suddenly erased years of work:

> *"My students were from different cities and even different countries. Suddenly there was no way to hold classes. Twelve years of teaching disappeared overnight. Prices kept rising because of inflation, but I had no income anymore."*

For others, the consequences extended beyond income loss. Sufi, a 26-year-old woman who had moved from a small town to Tehran through remote work opportunities, lost her job during layoffs that followed the economic crisis and internet restrictions. Unable to pay rent, she was forced to return to her family home.

> *"I spent years becoming skilled in my profession. Now it feels like all of it has become abstract, like it never existed."*

Queer workers often describe even greater dependence on digital labor. Many avoid formal workplaces because of discrimination linked to appearance, gender expression, or sexuality.

Moon, a queer freelance graphic designer, explains:

> *"Because of my appearance and lifestyle, I never felt safe being an employee in Iran. Freelancing online wasn't ideal, but it allowed me to survive. Then suddenly*

> *everything collapsed. I lost my work, my clients, my references, my design tools, even access to platforms where I could find new jobs. There are no real domestic alternatives."*

The economic consequences of shutdowns are especially harsh because online work in Iran already exists under precarious conditions. Many women and queer freelancers work without contracts, insurance, labor protections, or savings. Even short periods of disruption can create debt, housing insecurity, or food insecurity. Some interviewees mention borrowing money from friends or delaying medical treatment because of the sudden loss of income after the shutdowns. Others report that clients outside Iran stopped trusting them because communication became impossible.

For academics, artists, and researchers, internet shutdowns also sever access to knowledge itself. Increasingly, libraries, archives, journals, and international conversations are deeply tied to digital access as many physical resources are limited or censored.

Darya, an art researcher who has long faced exclusion from formal academic employment for political reasons, describes the internet as inseparable from her intellectual and social life:

> *"The internet gave me a sense of existence in the world. Reading, writing, research, friendships, political discussions, all of it was tied to online space. I believed that as long as I had internet access, I could still work and remain connected to the world despite everything. Without it, I lost both my livelihood and my sense of belonging."*

For students and researchers, shutdowns also interrupt access to international scholarships, academic applications, and professional collaboration. Many of the interviewees noted that they missed deadlines for scholarships, conferences, or job opportunities abroad because websites and email services became inaccessible. In a country where academic isolation is already pervasive because of sanctions and censorship, internet restrictions deepen the sense of exclusion from global intellectual life.

Sufi said that this year she had planned to apply to universities abroad in hopes of continuing her education and building a more stable future outside Iran. But the January 2026 internet shutdowns and the four months of disruption that followed made that impossible. Deadlines passed while she was still struggling simply to reconnect to the outside world. For her, internet shutdowns did not only mean unemployment, losing her home, reduced communication, and being forced to return to her family house. It also took away her ability to plan academically for the following year and closed off one of the few futures she still imagined for herself.

These experiences speak to the fact that internet shutdowns are not temporary inconveniences. They directly reshape economic independence and force many women back into forms of dependence they had struggled to escape.

Isolation, Identity, and Mental Health

For many women and queer people in Iran, the internet has also served as one of the only available spaces for visibility and community. In a society where queer identity can expose people to great risks - violence, criminalization, family rejection, or social isolation - online platforms have often provided safer ways to meet others, build friendships, exchange knowledge, and speak openly.

Anonymous accounts, group chats, feminist reading circles, online communities, and social media networks have allowed people to discuss gender, sexuality, mental health, and everyday survival in ways that are often impossible offline.

Samaneh, a queer woman, explains:

> *"We are scattered and isolated. Many of us cannot openly talk about our identities in public or even within our families. The internet is where many of us first found each other and understood ourselves. Without it, support becomes much harder. You lose the feeling of being seen."*

For queer people who already have limited access to public space, digital disappearance can feel like social disappearance. Matin, a deaf trans woman whose brothers work for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, had used Instagram to sell artwork and become financially independent from her family. After the shutdown, she feared she might be forced to return to an unsafe home environment where her gender identity places her at severe risk.

Beyond identity and friendship, the internet also provides access to information that is difficult or dangerous to obtain offline. Mental health resources, feminist writing, sexual health information, online counseling, and discussions around gender and trauma often circulate primarily through digital networks.

Shabnam, a trans woman, lost all connection to safe medical services during the internet shutdowns. She explains:

> *"For LGBTQ+ people, Telegram groups and Twitter were often how we found safe clinics, pharmacies, and doctors where we could feel less exposed or uncomfortable. No doctor or medical center openly advertises whether they are safe for queer people or not. Most spaces are still full of outdated stereotypes and deeply misinformed ideas about gender and sexuality."*

Moon, a queer activist and researcher, describes the shutdown as the destruction of an intellectual and emotional world:

> *"The groups and communities that mattered to me disappeared. It feels like my library was suddenly closed with no reopening date. Because of my appearance, many physical spaces already felt unsafe for me. The internet compensated for that exclusion. Suddenly all those spaces vanished too."*

Several interviewees compared the experience to forms of confinement. Some described constantly refreshing blocked applications, hoping connections would return for even a few minutes. Others spoke about panic attacks, insomnia, and emotional numbness during long periods of disconnection. For people whose closest relationships existed online, the shutdowns created a sudden silence that felt deeply destabilizing.

Darya, who lives in a small town and relies heavily on online networks for intellectual and political connection, says:

> *"People understand the violence of war and killing. But the violence of internet shutdowns is more invisible. It destroys your relationships, your work, your identity, your ability to participate in the world. It's difficult to even explain this kind of loss."*

The emotional effects of shutdowns are intensified by the constant uncertainty surrounding them. Many people no longer believe these restrictions are temporary. Interviewees

repeatedly described the feeling that every future political crisis could once again bring total digital isolation. This anticipation itself creates exhaustion and anxiety.

The shutdowns also intensify loneliness for people living in conservative or unsafe family environments. For many women, the internet is the only place where they can openly discuss feminism, sexuality, politics, or even everyday frustrations without fear of punishment. When these spaces disappear, they are forced back into silence inside homes where surveillance and control already shape and restrict their daily lives.

In the absence of these online spaces, dominant public narratives become even more hostile. Feminist and queer voices are already excluded and stigmatised in official Iranian discourse, but many interviewees also describe exclusion inside parts of the political opposition itself. When digital platforms disappear, so do many of the spaces where marginalized people can speak in their own voices.

Internet Shutdowns and Political Organizing

Over the last decade, much feminist and grassroots organizing in Iran has depended on encrypted messaging apps and online networks. These spaces have been used to raise bail money for prisoners, document arrests, share information about protests, circulate feminist statements, support families of detainees, and connect activists across different cities and countries. When the internet is cut off, these fragile infrastructures collapse almost immediately.

Domestic platforms are widely considered unsafe because of surveillance concerns. For many activists, ordinary phone calls are also high-risk. This fear is not abstract. In recent years, accusations against activists have escalated dramatically, including charges connected to national security, collaboration with hostile governments, and espionage. Women activists, especially after the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising, have faced particularly intense surveillance.

Azadeh, a feminist and child rights activist who previously spent over a year in prison, explains:

> *"People are being executed and others don't even know. Before, at least you could post online if someone urgently needed bail money or legal help. We could connect prisoners' families with trusted lawyers or therapists. Now we have lost almost all of our connections. And every day I wake up and I see political prisoners are being executed and there is nothing we can do about it."*

Fara, a longtime feminist activist, recalls a moment during the January protests when someone injured by live ammunition urgently needed medical care. Because of the internet shutdown, securely contacting doctors became almost impossible:

> *"I eventually had to make a direct phone call, knowing it could expose me, the doctor, and the injured person to surveillance. But someone's life was in danger."*

For feminist networks, internet restrictions interrupt not only communication but also the building of political organization itself. Reports about arrests, prison conditions, gender-based violence, femicide, domestic abuse, and state violence are often first documented through informal digital networks. When these channels disappear, documentation slows or stops entirely. Fara also described the loss of emotional coordination during crises. During protests and waves of arrests, online communication often functions as a way to check whether friends are alive, detained, injured, or missing. Without internet access, uncertainty expands rapidly. Families struggle to find information, rumors spread more easily, and consequently fear intensifies.

During earlier crackdowns, including the November 2019 protests and the January 2026 unrest, communication blackouts limited the circulation of images, testimony, and casualty numbers. Inside Iran, activists see this not only as censorship, but as a form of isolation deliberately imposed during moments of fear.

Internet as Infrastructure of Survival

In authoritarian, politically closed contexts such as Iran, where public assembly is extremely risky and independent media are heavily restricted, the internet becomes more than just a technical tool.

For women, queer people, dissidents, researchers, artists, and precarious workers, it becomes part of the infrastructure of survival itself. Online spaces allow people to build support networks, share political language, organize collectively, access knowledge, earn money, and maintain forms of emotional continuity. This is especially important for those already excluded from equal participation in public life.

Internet shutdowns therefore should not be understood simply as communication problems. They are forms of infrastructural violence.

They limit access to work, disrupt social support systems, intensify economic dependence, weaken political organizing, and isolate already marginalized communities. The effects are uneven. Groups that are better off often retain alternative forms of access and mobility. But women, queer people, precarious workers, and politically marginalized communities experience these restrictions much more harshly.

At the same time, internet shutdowns reshape whose voices remain visible. When feminist and queer networks disappear from public conversation, dominant narratives become more entrenched. State discourse, misogynistic rhetoric, nationalist propaganda, and other exclusionary narratives fill the silence. In this sense, internet restrictions are not only about controlling information. They are also about controlling visibility, belonging, and the possibility of collective life.

All this culminates in a situation that can be encapsulated as a sense of separation from the outside world – a form of collective imprisonment – most eloquently described by Moon who spent a year in prison because of her feminist artworks:

> *"In prison, whenever I spoke to people on the phone, I felt that no one could truly understand what I was going through. Today, when I speak to people outside Iran, I feel the same thing. It is as if I am imprisoned all over again. Life continues normally for others, while for me time stretches endlessly. These two temporalities never align-just as they never did in prison. Today I may be free from prison, but I feel this disconnection and estrangement from the outside world even more intensely. It feels as though ninety million people are each trapped in solitary cells, slowly wearing down day by day."*