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Q1(e)

Comment on the Red Lipstick Movement in the context of feminist rights.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- Identify the Red Lipstick Movement as feminist dissent, especially in Iran
- Explain lipstick as a political act against compulsory modesty and morality police
- **Place it in feminist rights:** body, public space, citizenship
- Link to Woman, Life, Freedom and to **lipstick feminism** as theory

Revision summary

The Red Lipstick Movement uses visible makeup as dissent against compulsory hijab and morality police, especially in Iran after 2022.

The act claims the face and street as women's civic space, not as fashion advertising.

It sits with Woman, Life, Freedom and with feminist arguments that the personal and the bodily are political.

Lipstick feminism in Western theory reclaimed makeup; the Iranian use is a harder human-rights refusal.

Closed regimes leak through small, repeatable gestures when parties and press are blocked.

Introduction

The **Red Lipstick Movement** is a feminist practice of dissent in which women paint a visible, 'immodest' mouth as a claim on the street. In **Iran**, after the death of **Mahsa (Jina) Amini** in 2022 and through the Woman, Life, Freedom rising, red lipstick became a small, repeatable refusal of the morality police. The point is not cosmetics. It is the body as a rights-bearing public fact.

Body

What the act does

Compulsory hijab and the **Guidance Patrol** try to write women's faces out of civic space. Lipstick, uncovered hair, and dancing in the street reverse the instruction. A red mouth is cheap, mobile and photographable. It says: this face is not the state's property. Similar gestures appear in other autocratic settings where dress codes police gender - but the UPSC stem is read most clearly through Iran's 2020s protests, not as a Western advertising slogan.

Feminist rights, not fashion

First-wave rights were the vote and the law. **Second-wave** rights named the personal as political. **Lipstick feminism** (a late-wave, often Western, strand) reclaimed makeup from the charge that it is only patriarchal display. The Iranian street use is harder. It is closer to **Nawal El Saadawi** and to bodily autonomy under theocracy than to a mall. **Carole Pateman's** sexual contract, **Nancy Fraser** on public spheres, and **Cynthia Enloe's 'where are the women?' all help: the international is made in households and on pavements. When a regime beats women for a lock of hair, lipstick is a human-rights claim** - expression, equality, freedom from cruel treatment - not a lifestyle brand.

Comparative politics

The movement shows how **closed socialisation** leaks. It also shows transnational feminist networks: diaspora video, #MahsaAmini, and UN Human Rights Council scrutiny. States reply with arrests, internet cuts and 'hijab law' amendments. Success is mixed: the Islamic Republic has not fallen; everyday non-compliance has widened. For PSIR, the lesson is that feminist rights are fought in the grammar of appearance when speech and parties are blocked. Say that clearly, without treating Iranian women as a metaphor for someone else's culture war.

Flow diagram

Red lipstick -> Body as public claim
Body as public claim -> Feminist rights
Iran morality police -> Red lipstick
Woman Life Freedom -> Red lipstick

Conclusion

- **Red lipstick in this movement is a feminist rights-claim:** the face in public against compulsory modesty. It is dissent you can wear when the podium is banned. Theory names it; Iranian women enacted it.

Facts & figures

Mahsa (Jina) Amini

Died in 2022 after morality-police custody in Tehran; protests under the Kurdish-origin slogan Woman, Life, Freedom followed.

Guidance Patrol

Iran's morality police enforcing hijab and dress codes; a core target of feminist street dissent.

Lipstick feminism

A late-wave strand that treats makeup as possible agency; in Iran the same object is used as anti-theocratic protest, not as consumer choice alone.