

A photograph of a woman's face and hand looking through white metal bars. The woman is wearing a blue headscarf and a black garment. Her hand is resting on the bars, and she is wearing a ring. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Sexual Politics in Modern Iran

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## 9 The Islamic Revolution, its sexual economy, and the Left

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The 1979 Islamic Revolution was not a wholesale return to the past; rather, the new state reinvented and expanded certain retrogressive gender and cultural practices and presented them as what Foucault has called a “regime of truth” through modern technologies of power. As part of its commitment to modernity, the Islamist state continued the literacy and health campaigns of the Pahlavi era. It also created, alongside the army and the police force, a parallel series of paramilitary forces. Once the regime attained some degree of authority, it established a new juridical discourse on sexuality, with the underlying theme of granting more power over women’s sexuality and reproductive functions to the state and to men, while also reversing modern trends in love and marriage. The state encouraged polygamy (multiple *‘aqdā*) and temporary marriage, as well as the return of easy divorce for men. While these measures weakened conjugal bonds of affection, they also served to compensate men who had acquiesced to the strictures of the new theocratic state. In the name of morality and the preservation of women’s honor, men of all social classes gained easier, cheaper access to sex, both inside and outside of formal marriage. The state reduced the age of marriage, and encouraged motherhood and large families, while limiting or closing other life choices for urban professional women. Small openings that had emerged for a modern gay lifestyle in elite urban circles vanished and were replaced with a partial return to practices of covert bisexuality in male and female homosocial spaces.

The long Iran–Iraq War helped the regime to consolidate its new policies including those on sexuality. In September 1980 Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, hoping for a quick victory. This caused a patriotic fervor across the whole country, as hundreds of thousands of Iranians mobilized in defense of the nation. Backed by the Western powers, Iraq initially made territorial gains, but was pushed back by the combined force of the Iranian Army and the parallel military organizations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdarans) and the Basij (People’s Militia). The latter sent over 100,000 recruits to the war front, including students, workers, and government employees, and thousands of impoverished youth, often mere

boys recruited for “martyrdom operations,” with the promise of paradise after death. They were dispatched on mine-clearing operations with staggering losses. In 1982 Saddam Hussein withdrew his troops from the disputed territories and attempted to negotiate a truce, but Ayatollah Khomeini chose to carry on with the war, which was helping him to cement his authority and to strengthen the foundations of the Islamic government. The war dragged on until 1988, when Iran was finally pressured into accepting a UN-negotiated ceasefire. Both nations suffered catastrophic damage. There is much debate about the number of dead and wounded. It is estimated that the war left at least 300,000 dead (200,000 Iranians and 100,000 Iraqis) and 600,000 wounded, and caused severe damage to urban centers and oil refineries (“Iran–Iraq War,” 2004; Hiro 1990).

At home, the war allowed Khomeini and his allies to speed up the implementation of their harsh Islamist program and eliminate their moderate Islamic, nationalist, and leftist allies. By 1986, the Pasdaran had grown to 350,000 members grouped in battalion-size units, including a small navy and air force. The Basij, whose members were boys younger than eighteen, men older than forty-five, and those who had recently completed military service, had enrolled some 3 million armed volunteers at 11,000 centers, including many women’s units. The Pasdaran received professional military training and operated on a fulltime basis, while the Basij consisted of those on active duty and others kept on reserve. Together, the Pasdaran and the Basij were considered the “eyes and ears” of the Islamic Republic. They served under the direct authority of Ayatollah Khomeini and his trusted followers, and were not subject to any elected bodies such as the presidency or the Parliament (Hiro 1990; *Iran: A Country Study* 2004, 11; “Pasdaran” 2007). While they undertook many such activities before the war, after it ended the Basij and the Pasdaran gave even greater attention to the surveillance and repression of the domestic population. Equipped with the latest weapons and subject to sophisticated riot-control training, they worked with the secret police and were instrumental in eliminating dissident groups. They spied on the general population. One of their most visible activities involved prowling around schools and factories to enforce the *hijab* regulations, often arresting youth for improper clothing and conduct. This could occur for as minor an infraction as a young man caught wearing a short-sleeved shirt. They also stopped cars to check for alcohol or use of makeup by women; they burst into weddings and arrested guests for improper dress, alcohol violations, or Western music. After the war they also broke into homes to destroy banned satellite TV receptors. These activities were coordinated by vigilantes who called themselves Hezbollah (Party of God). Hezbollah intimidated intellectuals by firebombing

bookstores, disrupting social and political gatherings, and killing dissidents (“Niruyeh Moghavemat” 2006; “Pasdaran” 2007).

As the new revolutionary regime was placing greater limits on the rights of modern urban citizens, especially women, it simultaneously encouraged the more cloistered women of the old middle classes to become politically active in support of the Islamist cause. This is why Iranian women reacted to the policies of the Islamic Republic in such varied ways. Modern urban women condemned the severe restrictions of the new regime, which deprived them of numerous rights, but many from the old middle classes welcomed the new regime and actually gained greater rights. The latter group credited Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution, and the war with emancipating them from rigid and patriarchal households and allowing them to become active participants in society. This was true even when this activism began by denouncing more secular supporters of women’s rights. These disparate histories form the subject of this chapter and the next.

### **The Islamist panopticon**

In 1978 Foucault hoped that the Iranian Revolution would become a countermodern revolution that would unleash a radical form of political spirituality for Iran and the broader Muslim world. But it would be a mistake to call the Islamist social order countermodern. Both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamist regime employed various techniques of modernity, particularly ones that operated directly on the body. Foucault’s technologies of power can help us to analyze the modern disciplinary practices of the Pahlavi era and its harsh secret police, the SAVAK. But they can also help to delineate the modalities of power under the Islamic Republic.

Soon after the revolution, citizens found themselves under the constant gaze of an Islamist state that observed and regulated public (and in some cases private) bodily functions (Fig. 9.1). The Khomeini regime included all of the elements of a modern panopticon. Practices that were more or less voluntary during the Pahlavi era (and often before), such as fasting during the month of Ramadan, participating in the Friday prayer, or ritual mourning during the month of Muharram, were now strongly encouraged by the state. Ablution, daily prayer, fasting, and avoidance of contact with ritually “impure” people were no longer merely personal matters of faith for Shi’i Muslims, but legal requirements that the state sometimes enforced. Implementation was relatively simple. A hierarchical method of observation was established with the clerics at the top. Modern Islamist interpretations of old Shi’i regulations produced normative judgments, a set of rules that required continued observance. In Foucauldian



Figure 9.1 Revolutionary poster

terms, the religious judges compared, differentiated, hierarchized, homogenized, and excluded: in short, the new order began to “normalize” the population. The concept of *taharat* now had an added meaning: the physical elimination and “cleansing of forces that posed a danger to the sacrosanct regime” (Chafiq 2006, 88). Sunni Muslims, non-Muslims, ethnic minorities with potentially autonomous aspirations (Kurds, Turkomans, Baluchis), secular Shi’i Muslims, members of the left-wing opposition, advocates of women’s rights, and Shi’i theologians with more tolerant

readings of Islamic law were all subjected to close surveillance. When they refused to go along, dissidents were routinely beaten, jailed, tortured, or executed. Officials of the former regime, leaders of the Baha'i community, and gay men were also executed, sometimes without trial. The so-called "hanging judge," Sadeq Khalkhali, had his men prowling the streets in search of political and religious suspects.

Khomeini's Islamist state gathered information relentlessly, first through the Office for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and later through the revamped secret police, the Pasdaran, and the Basij. In addition, many ordinary citizens internalized the ethos of the new regime and eagerly imposed these rules on others, something the state counted on to achieve its goals. Many public spaces were re-segregated along gender lines soon after the revolution. Only a week after Khomeini assumed power on February 11, 1979, *Le Monde* reported that Tehran University was "one of the rare places, perhaps the only one, where women come alongside men and hold discussions with them as equals" (Balta 1979). In June, beaches at the Caspian Sea resorts were segregated by sex. In the spring of 1980, unveiled women were knifed in the northwestern town of Urumiyeh and turned away by *bazaar* merchants in the southern port of Bushire (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982, 235). In many of these cases, the new rules were not yet directly enforced by the vigilantes and the clerical establishment, which in any case did not have full legal authority until spring 1981. Many citizens accepted the regime's ideology, based on the imagined community of early Islam, as a utopian ideal that would cleanse Iran of a century of Western spiritual pollution. They assumed that the gender hierarchies of the new regime constituted an important step in that direction.

After the revolution, the government of the Islamic Republic revamped a number of the Pahlavi institutions. Mosques, theological seminaries, and religious courts became the new centers of power. The state closed mixed secular schools, and segregated institutions of learning by sex. Religious bodies of knowledge (the Qur'an, the *shari'a*, the writings of Khomeini) came to dominate other forms of knowledge (humanities, social sciences, modern law, and even math and science). As a result, students could no longer enter the university without passing an extra exam in religious subjects. The courts of the Pahlavi era were shut down, secular judges were replaced by clerics, and female judges were altogether removed from the bench. The state tried to reverse a process of secularization that had begun with the Constitutional Revolution. The regime played down national non-Muslim rituals, such as the Nowruz New Year festivities, placing greater emphasis on Shi'i rituals and holidays. The new government tried to eliminate certain technologies of the body

such as sports, particularly for women. Modern contact sports such as volleyball came to be considered transgressive, because bodies were exposed, though curiously no limits were placed on traditional wrestling matches, where contestants are partially naked. Some sports competed with religious events for public attention; for example, soccer matches often conflicted with daily prayers. As a result, televised soccer matches were stopped during calls for prayer and resumed when prayer was over until 2002.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the revolution the *chador* and the *hijab* had become symbols of resistance against the Pahlavi regime. They represented the unity of women across social and class boundaries, as well as resistance to Western norms. Many leftist women donned the *hijab* out of respect for the more religious and traditional sectors in the revolutionary movement. By July 1981, however, the *hijab* and the *chador* had come to represent the political and ideological hegemony of the Islamist state. Women who worked for the state were often required to wear the all-enveloping black *chador*, the state's preferred dress code. All others had to observe a more modified form of *hijab*. The *hijab* of the Islamic Republic was starker than that of leftist Muslim groups such as the Mojahedeen Khalq. The regime's prescribed minimum attire consisted of a long and very loose cloak or overcoat, known as a *manto* [manteau], loose pants, and a large scarf covering the hair and neck, in black, brown, navy, or gray shades. The face could be exposed. Female vigilantes, known as Sisters of Zainab, monitored other women, who could be dragged to the offices of the **Center for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice** and beaten, even for minor violations of the *hijab* requirements. At times, the struggles over the *hijab* or sports became life-and-death battles, because the Islamist state defined itself through bodily rituals that prevented "impurities" and maintained gender hierarchies. For women, showing strands of hair from under the scarf, wearing makeup, or maintaining other forms of a modern aesthetic of the body became modes of resistance.

The regime established its control not only through brute force but also through a coherent cultural discourse that demonized feminist accomplishments and linked women's rights both to notions of ritual impurity and to Western imperialist designs on the nation. It emphasized women as mothers, making the anniversary of the birthday of Fatimah (the mother of Hussein) into a Mother's Day holiday. But as against earlier notions of motherhood, a major part of a mother's virtue was redefined as the giving

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Morteza Dehghani for information on this issue.

of martyrs to the Islamist cause. This received special emphasis after the outbreak of the war in 1980.

### **The degradation of the modern urban woman**

By late February of 1979, the real power lay in the hands of the Revolutionary Council, a small, secretive group of clerics close to Ayatollah Khomeini. On the surface, the government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan (1979) seemed relatively pluralistic, with no clerics and four members of the National Front as cabinet ministers. Feminists were comforted by the fact that Bazargan's wife did not observe the *hijab*. Khomeini's council frequently countermanded his minister's orders, however, and also changed its policies by fiat. Bazargan began to issue verbal attacks on "Marxists," whom he threatened to crush if they attempted to destabilize the country. The new regime also started to round up former officials of the shah's regime, some of whom were executed after summary trials. In addition, the new government maintained rigid control over the broadcast media. Public whippings were instituted as the penalty for alcohol consumption.

One potential source of opposition, the Tudeh Party, announced its unconditional support for Khomeini. The party's leading theoretician, Ehsan Tabari, likened the struggle between the shah and Khomeini to that between the Sunni Caliph Yazid and the revered Shi'i Imam and martyr, Imam Hussein (d. 680), and encouraged all its supporters to fully back Khomeini (Hashemizadeh 2007, 14). Since the Tudeh's loyalty to Moscow was legendary, this meant that the Soviet Union had made accommodations to the new regime. However, the two rival groups to the left of the Tudeh that enjoyed strong student support, the Fedayeen Khalq and the Mojahedeen Khalq, began to adopt increasingly critical stances.

On March 1, the Association of Iranian Writers warned that the "democratic character of the revolution must be preserved." Censorship had returned, along with renewed limits on freedom of expression. Vigilantes were intimidating newspapers and harassing public demonstrations and lectures. According to the Association, the vigilantes "cleansed" library books, and they also "brought to an end the rights of women, who had played an important role in the revolution" (Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran 1979). A series of specific measures aimed particularly at modern urban women were promulgated during the first weeks of the revolution. On February 26, Khomeini issued a letter abrogating the Family Protection Law, which had been a milestone for women's rights. On March 3, the new regime prohibited women from serving as judges. The





Figure 9.2 Poster for International Women's Day gathering at Tehran University, March 1979

next day, Khomeini announced that initiating divorce would be an exclusively male prerogative. On March 6, the Ministry of Defense announced that women could no longer serve in the army. On March 9, women were banned from participation in sports, including the Olympic team. Thus, only a few weeks after Khomeini's return to Tehran, the state's intention of reversing decades of gender reforms was unmistakable.

A dramatic moment of resistance occurred on March 8, 1979, International Women's Day – the date of a historic demonstration by Iranian women (Fig. 9.2). This event drew global attention and the support of leading European and American feminists, including Simone

de Beauvoir and Kate Millett (Millett 1982, 152). Progressive and leftist intellectuals around the world had generally supported the overthrow of the shah, though there was some uncertainty about the role of religion in a state that was to be led by a cleric. At the International Women's Day demonstration, the authoritarian character of Iran's new regime became apparent to many of its supporters, at home and abroad, who came to fear the new direction of the revolution and its implications for the fate of Iranian women.

On March 7, at a speech to thousands of supporters in Qom, Khomeini declared that, while he would not prohibit women's employment, he would require government employees to wear the *hijab* at work, "In Islamic ministries women should not arrive nude [unveiled] ... It is permissible for them to go to work, but they must wear a *hijab* according to the *shari'a*" (Khomeini 2005, 72). Several events commemorating International Women's Day had already been planned for the next day at Tehran University. In response to Khomeini's edict, thousands of angry urban women and their male supporters poured onto the streets near the university, where they held large demonstrations against the ruling. The demonstrations continued for five days. At their height, tens of thousands of women and men participated in Tehran. Some leftist men formed a cordon around the women, fighting off armed attackers from the Hezbollah. The demonstrators chanted "No to the *Chador*," "Down with the Dictatorship," and even the occasional "Down with Khomeini." One widely quoted banner read, "We Made the Revolution for Freedom, But Got Unfreedom," while others proclaimed, "At the Dawn of Freedom, There Is No Freedom." Hezbollah chanted in response, "You will cover yourselves or be beaten," but their actions were mainly nonverbal: stones, knives, and even bullets aimed at protesting women. As demonstrations continued, the government announced that Khomeini's directive had been "misunderstood." The new dress code was merely a recommendation, not a requirement, and the Family Protection Law would be restored. Both of these concessions were temporary. On Saturday, March 10, 15,000 women held a sit-in protest at the Ministry of Justice. The statement the women read out emphasized the important role women had played in the revolutionary movement and reminded the authorities that Khomeini had promised women all their social and political rights before assuming power. By March 12, the women's demonstrations had spread to numerous cities around the country. After a long public debate at Tehran University, during which the Fedayeen declined to help protect the marchers any longer, and other leftist groups urged the women to call off the march, thousands poured out into the streets again. But March 12 was the last large feminist demonstration. Another gathering at the national

television station to protest biased coverage was far smaller. After that, the women's movement called off its public demonstrations, largely because of pressures from leftist groups such as the Fedayeen, the most influential group on the campus of Tehran University. The Fedayeen argued that the paramount issue now was the need to avoid strife in the revolutionary camp, which could pave the way for US intervention (Gueyras 1979).

In response to the women's demonstrations, the Islamists organized a counter-demonstration that involved more women than the earlier feminist protest. On March 16, some 100,000 demonstrators, many of them women clad in black *chadors*, rallied in Tehran to defend Khomeini and denounce the women's demonstrations of the previous week. While the crowd was larger, the Islamist women's demonstration enjoyed the full support of the regime, including free transportation, and freedom from harassment on the streets. Thus, from the first months of the revolution, the regime encouraged the political activism of women from more religious sectors of society, using them to clamp down on supporters of women's rights and on modern urban women more generally.

In their recollections of these events, several Iranian feminists have suggested that supporters of democracy lost an important opportunity to resist the Islamization program of the new government in March 1979, when the women's demonstrations were called off. Secularization from above, and denial of autonomy under the Pahlavi regime, had enfeebled the new middle classes and reduced many to a situation of apathy and hopelessness. Echoing regime charges, major leftist organizations like the Fedayeen and the Mojahedeen labeled the women's rights activists as "*agents provocateurs*" whose purpose was to derail the revolution (Moghissi 1996, 143).<sup>2</sup>

As the government of the Islamic Republic escalated its attacks on women's rights, democratic forces, such as the satirical journal *Ahangar* in Tehran, warned of the impending gender segregation and the imposition of draconian Islamic laws of retribution (Figs. 9.3, 9.4, 9.5). Members of the leftist **National Union of Women (NUW)** and other women's groups continued to call upon the Fedayeen and other secular leftist groups to help them organize around gender-specific issues, such as the campaign against the reimposition of compulsory veiling, the Islamization of family law, and sex segregation. But their requests for logistical support (renting a hall, announcing a demonstration) were repeatedly turned down. Many members of the Fedayeen maintained,

<sup>2</sup> Some of the text in the above paragraphs appeared earlier in chapter 4 of Afary and Anderson 2005.

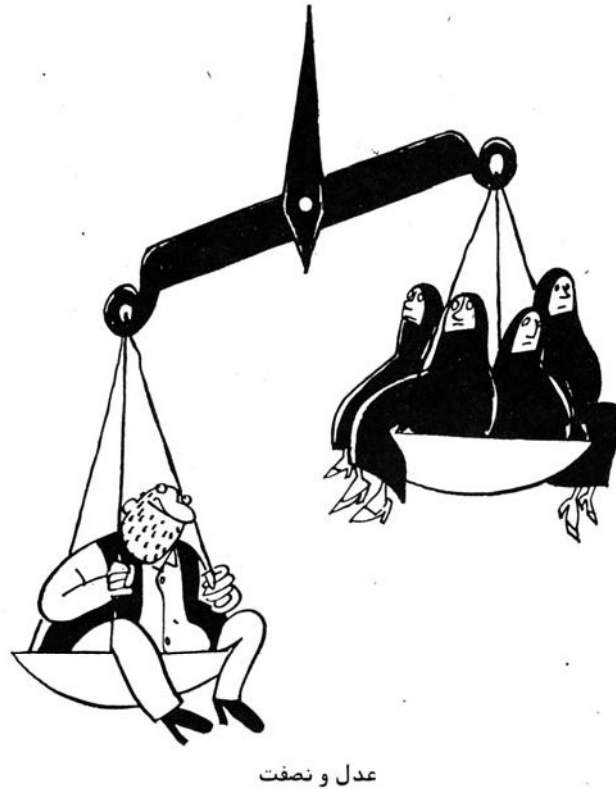


Figure 9.3 Justice under the Islamic Republic, 1979

“the *hijab* was not the issue of women workers, but that of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois women” (Basiri 1999, 151), while the Mojahedeen had enforced a mild form of *hijab* on their women members long before the revolution.

For a while, even with these difficulties, activist women made considerable inroads in small villages around Tehran with their literacy campaigns and discussions of social and economic issues. Yet leftist parties often used the women’s organizations solely as a front to recruit members to the parent organization. As Ali Keshtgar, member of the Central Committee of the Fedayeen, recalled years later:

The women’s question was about the toiling women and women of the working class. [Our] objective was to penetrate the NUW, using a handful of Marxist-Leninist

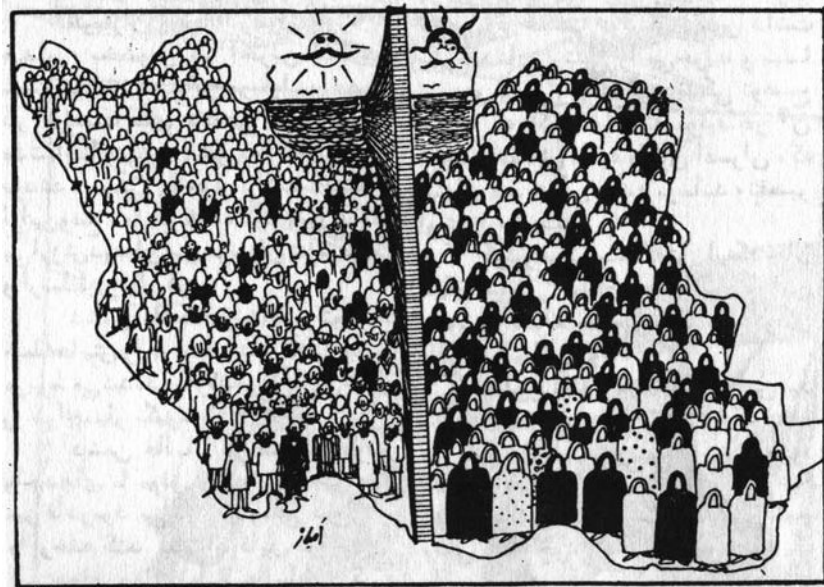


Figure 9.4 Map of Iran: anticipating full gender segregation of the nation, 1979



Figure 9.5 Punishment under the Islamic Republic: woman holding a book on human rights, 1979

women who would push for a Marxist-Leninist line, [then] capture the leadership organs in support of the interests of the toiling masses and ... shut out the intellectual women who were considered ... suspicious, petty-bourgeois, and counter-revolutionary. (cited in Moghissi 1996, 154)

In the above discourse use of the military terms such as “penetrate,” “capture,” and “shut out” pointed to the enormous hostility of the leftist leadership toward independent women’s rights organizations. Many activists in the NUW eventually left the organization over these manipulative and authoritarian policies, as well as fear of arrest and persecution by the Islamist state which intensified daily. In their writings the women lament the fact that the NUW remained a mostly sectarian leftist organization and did not become more inclusive, cutting across ideological divides and focusing on the combating of male chauvinism and its social ramifications in all sectors of Iranian society (Azadeh 1999, 131–132).

### **Drastic reversals in women’s rights**

The speed with which the government of the Islamic Republic was institutionalized in 1979 stunned most of the non-Islamist, educated urban activists who had participated in the revolution. They had thought that overthrowing the regime would bring about a more democratic society that would improve the rights of women in family and marriage. Many women, who had worn the veil as a symbol of protest during the revolution, had not realized that a key part of the Islamist agenda was to reverse women’s rights. Now they were on the verge of losing most of the rights they had taken for granted.

The 1979 constitution established the legal principles of the new Islamist state, which involved rule by an appointed cleric known as the Supreme Leader (*Rahbar*). The judicial system was entirely overhauled, and many reforms of the Constitutional and Pahlavi eras were jettisoned. The Islamic Civil Code included many elements of the *shari‘a* law of retribution. Women and men, Muslims and non-Muslims, no longer enjoyed equality under law. The testimony of two women now equaled that of a man. Evidence obtained from a Muslim man was worth twice that from a Muslim woman or a non-Muslim man. Life became particularly harsh for modern urban women. Lashing, amputation, and stoning were employed in administering justice, with the last punishment often reserved for women convicted of adultery (Afshari 2001, 55–69).

Khomeini declared the Family Protection Law “un-Islamic” and soon some provisions of the law were voided. The Islamist government was committed to reversing modern trends toward monogamous companionate marriage. Additionally, the Islamist state was determined to undermine

modern urban women's individuality and autonomy, as it defined a woman's rights and obligations in relation to her male relatives. A "harmonious marriage" was based on male domination in the family and authoritarian relations, whether between husbands and wives or fathers and children. Within the family, women's main functions were defined as "childbearing, child-rearing, and housework," while gender socialization emphasized "feminine and masculine roles" (Kian-Thiébaud 2005, 46).

The universities were shut down from spring 1980 to fall 1983 as part of a "cultural revolution" aimed at expelling undesirable students and faculty members and revising the curriculum. The state did not oppose girls' education *per se*, instead working to indoctrinate women through a comprehensive Islamization of the school curricula. A series of segregation policies also limited urban women's career choices and access to advanced education. The traumas of this period are well described in Azar Nafisi's moving memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003).

As government day-care centers were closed down, many educated women were forced out of full-time office jobs and into low-paying and part-time employment (Nomani and Behdad 2006, 127). By 1983, women faced innumerable restrictions and violations of their rights, based upon the return to Islamic *shari'ah* law, which defined a woman's legal rights as half of a man's.

New laws and regulations encouraged child marriage and polygamy, and prevented women from leaving abusive marriages, going far beyond the limitations of the Pahlavi era:

- (1) The reinstatement of male guardianship regarding major decisions in a woman's life, such as a father's permission for marriage or a husband's permission for education, employment, change in domicile, or travel.
- (2) The lowering of the legal age of marriage to puberty, which again was defined as nine for girls and fifteen for boys. Fathers and *valis* (guardians) could also arrange the marriage of a pre-pubescent girl or boy (in practice the age of women at first marriage remained constant).<sup>3</sup>
- (3) The adoption of a pronatalist policy; a ban on abortion, as well as limitations on the use of contraceptives.

<sup>3</sup> As Nomani and Behdad have shown, the age of marriage remained constant from 1976 to 1986 (17.9 for rural women and 19.0 for urban women), while child marriage continued to decrease (2006, Table 4.1).

- (4) New laws reinstated a husband's unilateral right to divorce. The couple would have to petition a court, which would encourage reconciliation, but if the husband refused, judges would issue a divorce certificate. Meanwhile, a husband could annul his divorce during the three-month '*idda* period without his wife's consent.
- (5) The return of polygamy and a man's right to take up to three additional '*aqdis* without permission of his first wife. The first wife lost the right to sue for divorce in such cases.
- (6) Policies encouraging temporary marriage, an institution that had largely fallen out of favor in the Pahlavi era, except around shrines and in poor urban sectors.
- (7) Limitations on the custody rights of mothers; reversal of provisions favoring mothers' guardianship over their children after the father's death.
- (8) Lighter sentences for husbands, brothers, and fathers accused of "honor killings."

Other laws curtailed women's access to public spaces and employment, further defining them as second-class citizens:

- (1) Compulsory *hijab* for women in public. Even slight violations of the *hijab* dress code brought severe punishment. Violators, once rounded up, could be sentenced to as many as seventy-four lashes or imprisonment for up to a year.
- (2) A ban on all co-ed. classes; resegregation of educational institutions, including cafeterias and many other public spaces.
- (3) Partial segregation of parks, restaurants, movie theatres, beaches, buses, and all other public spaces. In public buses, women sat at the back, and men at the front.
- (4) Restrictions on female state employees, resulting in the resignation or dismissal of 40,000 teachers between 1980 and 1985.
- (5) Closing of state-sponsored day-care centers to discourage women's employment.
- (6) Removal of women judges from the courts.
- (7) Prohibition against women's singing and dancing in public.
- (8) Ban on women's participation in public athletic events.
- (9) Injunctions on public wearing of makeup and anything that enhanced a woman's physical appearance such as bright nail polish or form-fitting clothes.
- (10) Regulations against public expressions of affection between men and women, sometimes leading to the arrest of engaged or married couples.





Figure 9.6 “Torture” by Shaqayeq

- (11) Execution and stoning of women charged with *zina* (adultery).
- (12) Arrest and execution of young activist women (and men), including members of the Mojahedeen and Fedayeen, on charges of opposition to the state (Fig. 9.6).<sup>4</sup>

Hezbollah goons sometimes stabbed and threw acid on young female activists on the streets before arresting them. Tens of thousands of dissidents, among them high-school and college students, journalists, doctors, teachers, workers, and housewives, young and old, were incarcerated and in some cases executed. Chahla Chafiq speaks of the emergence of a “sacred sado-fascism” inside the prisons, where men and women languished for months in solitary confinement and were tortured and raped. The perpetrators exemplified the definition of sadism as the desire for absolute control over another (Chafiq 2006, 100–101). Once the war ended in 1988, the remaining political prisoners were given a chance to join the Islamist *tavvabs* (repenters). In the early years of the revolution the *tavvabs* had joined the

<sup>4</sup> See Tabari 1984. Summaries of these changes also appeared in Tohidi 1991 and Tabari and Yeganeh 1982. I have also relied on Mir-Hosseini 1999; Kar 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b; Afshari 2001; Nomani and Behdad 2006, 76, and various newspapers in compiling this summary. I am indebted to Shahla Ezazi and Saeid Madani-Ghahfarokhi for their careful reading of this chapter and clarification of many issues. See also Ezazi 1998; Madani-Ghahfarokhi 2005.

guards and become enforcers of prison rules. In 1988, those who refused this offer, more than several thousand, were executed (Abrahamian 1999, 215).

In the early 1980s, some female prisoners were married as *sigheh* wives to their prison guards. Families often became aware of the death of their loved ones when the prison guards came to their homes and offered them an *ajr* (which a husband typically pays his *sigheh* wife) for their deceased daughters (Chafiq 2006, 123). These retrogressive laws and practices reverberated throughout society and reduced women to second-class citizens.

### **Marriage and the sexual economy of Iranian Islamism**

Soon the state and ordinary men gained immense authority over women's sexual and reproductive capacities. Fathers, grandfathers, and paternal uncles (as male guardians) were given extensive guardianship powers over female relatives. Once again, a father or *vali* could choose to marry off a pre-pubescent girl to a much older man of his choice (Article 1041 of the Civil Code). While the *'ulama* had historically differed on whether a woman needed her *vali*'s permission for first marriage, the state now established the more restrictive version of *shari'a* on this question (article 1044 of the Civil Code). With so many limits on interactions between single men and women, semi-arranged marriages became increasingly necessary. Accordingly, extended family gatherings again became a crucial arena for finding spouses (Wright 2001, 176).

Once a woman was married, the state made it nearly impossible for her to avoid her husband's sexual demands. In the 1980s sexual and psychological exploitation in marriage became a husband's prerogative (Kar 2003; Aghajanian 1986, 751). Polygamy and temporary marriage gave married men easy access to other sexual partners. Moreover, this increased their power at home, even if they did not exercise these rights. The absence of community property in marriage continued to disempower married, divorced, and widowed women. This sexual economy was not a minor side effect of the Islamist ideology. Rather, it formed an important, though often unspoken, reason for male support or acquiescence in the face of Islamization.

The revolution and the war changed relations at home. Confident and highly educated urban women were shocked by the discrepancy in rights between men and women. In the final days of 1980, Shirin Ebadi was stripped of her position as judge. Soon she became a clerk in the same court over which she had once presided. While she was powerless in her job, she refused to accept subservience in her marriage. Ebadi asked her husband, Javad Tavassolian, to go to a notary with her and grant her the right to divorce and custody of any future children they might have. He

agreed, much to the astonishment of the notary, and in this way they saved their marriage (Ebadi 2006, 53–54). But such legal rights depended entirely upon the husband's attitude.

After the revolution, leaders of various dissident and leftist parties encouraged their members to marry one another, hoping that marriage would avert government suspicion. Such "arranged political marriages" and even many love marriages proved fragile. In addition to the constant threat of arrest and possible execution, the young couple often realized that, aside from the political goals of the organization, they had little in common and scarcely knew each other (Farahani 2007).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, young leftist women rejected the types of manipulation implemented by wives of earlier times, who controlled men by feigning submission while entangling them in a web of overbearing familial relations. They had learned to verbalize their views, to argue passionately for social and political rights, and to demand equal treatment with men in political activity. Now they expected the same in marriage. But leftist men often had social and familial expectations not much different than those of their fathers, plus the Islamist state had further empowered them. Unlike Javad Tavassolian, many refused to give up these rights.

The life story of Vajihah Reza'i, a member of the Fedayeen organization, was not so uncommon in the 1980s. She had married Massoud Reza'i for love and against the advice of her family in 1970. After a few years they moved to the United States, where she worked and he attended college, as both became leaders of the Confederation of Iranian Students. They returned to Tehran during the revolution. Vajihah, who was now the mother of two children, quietly continued her political activities, while Massoud moved into the world of business. She was arrested in 1981 and spent a year in the dreaded Evin prison. Vajihah was related to a grand ayatollah, however, and was released before the authorities realized that she was a key political activist. Constantly frightened about another arrest, Vajihah was also concerned about her marriage and the future of her children. Massoud had become a successful company director and had started an open affair with his secretary. When Vajihah asked him to end the affair, he beat her viciously, making it clear that she simply had to endure the situation. This went on for some months. On a vacation trip to the Caspian Sea, for example, Massoud brought along his mistress and rented two adjacent villas, taking his meals with his secretary. Desperate about her situation, Vajihah offered Massoud three possible ways out: mend their relations and return to a monogamous marriage; divorce her;

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Fataneh Farahani for sharing her dissertation, part of which deals with this subject.

or keep the appearance of a married life and turn theirs into an open marriage, where she could also quietly see others. He refused all three of these solutions: he would not divorce her; he would continue seeing his mistress or any other woman; and he would not permit her to see anyone else. Eventually, Vajihah received a divorce by giving up her *mahriyeh* and the custody of her children. She fled on foot to Turkey to avoid another arrest at the hands of the Islamic Republic (Vahdati 2005; interview with Reza'i, September 16, 2007). Thousands of married women like Vajihah came to the realization that their husbands had changed, as the men freely took advantage of the new laws. Many left the country in the 1980s, creating colonies of single Iranian women in major cities around the world, such as Istanbul, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Los Angeles, and London. They became social workers, beauticians, small business owners, or went back to school. Often they channeled their anger into feminist activism.

Mehrangiz Kar, a human rights lawyer who spent two decades defending women in the Iranian courts, has documented various types of sexual violence aimed at married women. Of course, such sexual violence was common enough even before the revolution, especially in the provinces, where underage girls were illegally married. But the practice had spread further under the Islamic Republic. Medical doctors continued to report stories such as the following:

When I was an intern, I worked in the emergency section of the hospital. We had a phenomenon we called "the arrival of the bride" ... It meant a newly wed girl was brought to the hospital because of severe tearing and bleeding [of her hymen and vagina on her wedding night], and the doctors rushed to save her. (Cited in Kar 2000b, 476)

Men's unilateral right to repudiation (while curtailing women's right to divorce) disproportionately increased male authority in marriage (article 1133 of the Islamic Civil Code). In the first decade of the revolution, divorce rates shot up 200 percent in Tehran, leading to complaints in the Islamic Parliament (Maqsudi 2005, 14). Divorced women had limited child-custody rights, for boys up to the age of two and girls up to the age of seven. Also, the *'idda* waiting period was reinstated. Thus a husband who chose to take his wife back within three months of a unilateral divorce could simply do so, without considering her wishes, and the state enforced these practices. The courts expected women to tolerate most forms of sexual, physical, and mental abuse in marriage, and to continue living in the houses their husbands provided. Only male impotence, severe drug addiction, or intolerable violence (and here the bar was set quite high) could be admitted as grounds for female-initiated divorce. To avoid paying maintenance, men often abused their wives to make them leave

their homes; then they petitioned the courts and claimed that their wives were disobedient (*adam-e tamkin*) (Kar 2000b, 140). Even in such cases, the courts often advised women to go back home and try to patch things up with their husbands (Kar 2000b, 159–161).

The law was explicit about men's sexual prerogatives. Article 1108 of Iran's Islamic Civil Code states: "If a woman refuses to have sex with her husband without a valid religious justification, she has no right to maintenance" (Kar 2000b, 144). The courts were largely indifferent to charges of sexual violence in marriage. Although Shi'i law recommends abstaining from intercourse during menstruation, some clerics rejected even this right for women. Kar concludes:

In Iran, legal and traditional concepts are such that a woman is denied any right in her marriage bed. Disobedience (*adam-e tamkin*) in its specific [sexual] meaning gives the man the right to have intercourse with his wife without any concern for her physical or psychological readiness. Sometimes the judicial authorities ignore a man's sexual perversion in his treatment of his wife and do not even consider such conduct bad behavior. (Kar 2000b, 143)

In the 1990s, when censorship was relaxed a bit, violence against women became a recurring topic in the women's press. The public learned that the authorities routinely ignored the pleas of abused and mutilated women. Many suffered inhuman abuses, among them being burned with cigarettes, set on fire, or disfigured by acid. Another common story of abuse concerned children left in the custody of their father's family after divorce, whose mother had neither custody rights nor even weekly visitation rights (Kar 2000b, 288–289).

### **Temporary marriage**

During and after the war, the state pressured young war widows to remarry. Ranking clerics, and later President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), advocated temporary marriage as a solution to the economic burdens of the war and the moral dilemma of having many young widows around. There were about 56,000 war widows, and many were asked to engage in temporary marriage with ideologically committed Islamists or disabled veterans. The state also used the issue of the war widows to promote polygamy for all women. At the time, even some Islamist women took issue with this rationale. Azam Taleqani argued:

There are 500,000 fewer women than men in our country ... Yet we are told that we must accept that our husbands have the right to remarry. I even went to some of

our religious leaders and asked them whether they were backing the family or planning to destroy it? Since it is obvious that the moment a second wife steps in, effectively the first wife is discarded and her life is ruined ... But they are forcing women in this country to accept polygamy. (Cited in Omid 1994, 201)

Despite the state's call for single men to marry war widows, old cultural norms that expected virginity at first marriage had not died out, preventing some widows from finding suitable husbands (Zahedi 2006, 275). In addition, widows who entered polygamous marriages seemed to be more prone to divorce (Aghajanian 1986, 751). By 2005, only 4,868 war widows had successfully remarried, and the rest who continued to receive their pension had either divorced after a second marriage or chosen to remain single ("Khanevadeh-ye Shohada" 2005, 57).

The state promoted temporary marriage as a solution to other social ills as well. A media campaign involving radio, television, newspapers, mosques, books and pamphlets, and, later, the Internet, promoted *sigheh* as a morally sanctioned substitute for Western dating. Many such websites are still operating, as of this writing. They encourage men and women to avail themselves of this "sacrament" and suggest *sigheh* as an ethically suitable alternative to masturbation and prostitution.<sup>6</sup> Posters in offices claim, "*Sigheh* is the sweetest pleasure given to Muslim women," and "the best medicine for passion."<sup>7</sup> Such statements are usually attributed to the Prophet and the first and sixth Shi'i Imams. Pamphlets and books also encourage young people to enter a temporary marriage, before contracting an *'aqdi* one, thereby avoiding the possibility of early divorce ("Ezdevaj-e Movaqqat" 1991).

In the 1990s, high-school principals encouraged their students to enter a *sigheh* "trial marriage" instead of dating, although most adamantly refused to do so. President Rafsanjani proposed the practice as a way of circumventing the state's strict rules against intermingling of the sexes (Tait 2007). In addition, prostitutes were asked to have short-term *sigheh* marriages with the Pasdarans, the Basijis, and other veterans under the auspices of the state in a "House of Honor" (Khaneh-ye 'Effat), a euphemism for legalized prostitution. However, the proposal had to be shelved after severe public criticism. The practice was more common among Islamist men and women who joined various regime-sponsored revolutionary organizations and worked side by side (Haeri 1989, 96–100). Hence some Islamist enforcers of morality, who wore heavy black *chadors* and covered much of their faces, lived freer sexual lives in some respects

<sup>6</sup> For more information see <http://movaghat.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Houchang Chehabi and Mojghan Fatoorehchi for sharing these posters with me.

than the young, secular women they arrested on flimsy charges of sipping coffee with male colleagues in cafés and subjected to lashing.

As we shall see in the next two chapters, the state lifted some of its most draconian measures in the 1990s. Meanwhile sexual mores began evolving rapidly and some urbanites increasingly lost their inhibitions about premarital sex. Iranian society had become less religious as a reaction to the theocratic state and also from exposure to Western sexual mores through the Internet, satellite TV, and interaction with the Iranian diaspora. In this environment, inhibitions about temporary marriage decreased and some decided to use the institution to their advantage in order to circumvent the state. In the old days, traveling men contracted *sigheh* marriages when they went to another city for a few weeks or months; now some young couples who were not ready for an *'aqdi* marriage used the practice to avoid the hassle of the morality police. Secular urban girls contracted *sigheh* marriages with their boyfriends to go on vacations and spend extended periods away from home. Young, educated men who could not afford to marry entered into *sigheh* marriages with their girlfriends, promising to have an *'aqdi* marriage when they were financially stable. Twenty-year-old Mahriar, a college student, reported that every holiday he and his friends contracted temporary marriages with their girlfriends and went to a Caspian Sea resort, where they rented a villa with no worries about the morality police (Shakerifar 2006).

As women became more selective in choosing husbands or realized that they could not have the man they wanted, many turned to *sigheh* out of loneliness and financial desperation. An increase in widowhood from war, high divorce rates, and female unemployment augmented the pool of women available for temporary marriage. By 1983, divorce rates gradually moved back up to 88 per 1,000 marriages. In addition, remarriage rates for divorced women remained half those of divorced men. Most divorced men married younger, never-married women, unless the men had fathered multiple children. As Aghajanian has pointed out:

Since it is undignified for a never-married Iranian man to marry a divorcee, her best prospects are widowed men or those interested in a second wife. The widowed men are usually older than the divorcee and have a number of children. It is only in very rare circumstances that a divorcee enters a remarriage and becomes a man's second [*'aqdi*] wife. Under these conditions, many divorcees choose to remain unmarried (Aghajanian 1986, 753).

Or else they quietly became the mistress or *sigheh* of a married man, once again a practice that was more common within the *bazaar* and clerical classes. Hence, some urban middle-class women who despised the custom reluctantly became *sigheh* concubines to wealthy married men, often

those affiliated with the theocratic state, who bought them expensive villas and condominiums and annual memberships in posh health clubs. Most men and women kept such relationships semi-secret, because the stigma attached to the practice persisted. Love brokers also reappeared on the scene. Some were clerics who set up Internet sites for their business. They encouraged impoverished women and offered them weekend holidays at resorts with prosperous married men. As in premodern times, men also approached angry, desperate married women, sometimes with the help of love brokers. The broker and her connections produced fictitious certificates of *sigheh* marriage for these weekend getaways, and the men's influence and political connections allowed the couple protection from police harassment.<sup>8</sup>

### The return of homosocial spaces

By the late Pahlavi era, Iranian society had substantially moved away from status-defined homosexuality (and the cultural practice of bisexuality) to normative heterosexuality and a celebration of companionate marriage among the new urban middle classes. In small, elite circles, there was also a gradual acceptance of the modern gay lifestyle by the 1970s. After 1979, the Islamist state made homosexuality a capital offense, and in the early years of the revolution, several people who were open about their homosexual orientation were executed.<sup>9</sup> However, while claiming an openly gay or lesbian identity became impossible, the new sex-segregated society became more accepting of covert bisexuality.

NK, a thirty-three-year-old female medical doctor who attended a sex-segregated public high school in Tehran in the mid-1980s, recalled an atmosphere where same-sex attraction was relatively common. At sporting events, the best player or the captain of the volleyball or basketball team was usually the focus of attraction. The students did not necessarily categorize such relations as unusual, but rather as an experience in the life of a young woman who would eventually marry. In a world where parents constantly told daughters to guard their virginity, the girls also felt relatively safe in same-sex relations:

My parents never talked to me about sex. I knew that sex violated the taboo of virginity (*bekarat*). But none of us knew much about virginity and there were a lot

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Vajiheh Reza'i, April 16, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) estimated that from 1979 to 1997 at least 800 Iranians were executed on charges of sodomy. Most were said to be pedophiles and murderers despite the dubious veracity of such accusations. Others were political dissidents falsely labeled homosexuals. The number of people executed for engaging in consensual adult homosexual acts remains unclear ("Iran Asked to End" 1997).



of myths about it. Some thought it was a box-shaped membrane. Others believed it had seven layers. Only girls who had had sex with men could explain it to us, but they chose not to do so. In junior high school it was relatively common for girls to have sexual intimacy with one another. But unlike in the United States where people are labeled lesbians for such acts, no one pointed a finger at others or called them names. Sex with another girl was also considered safer than sex with boys for two reasons: (1) If adults found out about it their reaction was potentially less aggressive. (2) There was no perceived risk of losing one's virginity. With a woman you felt no matter what you did, you could not lose your virginity.<sup>10</sup>

During the war, similar relations reemerged on the frontlines. The war, which celebrated the heroism and camaraderie of men in the battlefield, revived many male homosocial and homoerotic expressions among the recruits. As Mino Moallem points out, this homosocial world was celebrated in the war propaganda of the era:

Men, both old and young, go about their daily lives – playing, exercising, reading, talking, strategizing, hugging, sleeping, bathing – on a battlefield that is both a real and an imaginary landscape. The war zone is a place between death and life, a land without women, enabling the expression of homoerotic desire. In this homosocial world, men live in proximity to each other and take care of each other. Women do not exist; this is a city of men of different generations living in harmonious contiguity. Contingent upon but parallel to the “real” world, the battlefield is a space where men are left alone. (Moallem 2005, 115)

This male homosocial space received praise in mystical homoerotic poems about the war. It emerged as well in wartime references to the tragic martyrdom of Hussein, in terms that connoted passionate love (*‘eshq* or *mohabbat*) and the camaraderie of lovers (*yars*):

The poetry of the battlefield describes a longing for the scent and the sight of the lover and promises the union of the martyr with the lover at the end of the path where the lover awaits. The motif of romanticized and eroticized longing in the poetic space of the battlefield continues in the union with Hussein ... Ironically, tragedy is transformed into the homoerotic union of men, and the homoerotic union of men into tragedy. (Moallem 2005, 116)

After the war, Basij veterans continued to remember the war and its sacrifices in similar ecstatic and romantic terms. The Basij websites and print media, which remain active at the time of this writing, are filled with such letters and essays. They describe the war as an “epic event where brave young men created passionate scenes of love and devotion.” They also define a Basij veteran as one who “takes responsibility,” “shows passion,” becomes “drunk” with ecstasy, and ultimately “unites” with his “beloved” as a result of such sacrifices. The essays repeatedly designate

<sup>10</sup> Interview with NK, November 13, 2006.

the Basij fighter (Basiji) as one who “prays to love.” The “Basiji is a man in love” and the gathering of the Basiji is “a school of love” where one learns “the alphabet of love,” “the scripting of martyrdom,” and “unity with immortality” (www.basijnews.com, retrieved January 17, 2006). Are these poems simply reproducing familiar tropes of Persian mystical poetry, celebrating spiritual devotion in passionate homoerotic language? Or are they telling us something more about homoerotic and homosexual relationships in the war zone? Only future research can shed light on these questions.

Outside the battlefield, the segregated institutions and public spaces of the Islamic Republic allowed for the revival and continuation of not just homosocial expression of love but covert homosexuality. Since kissing, hugging, and holding hands are acceptable between men and between women, covert homosexual conduct and bisexuality were not so conspicuous. According to an Iranian gay activist, before the revolution, homosexuals could meet only in elite hotels and bars. Now, finding a willing partner in a park was easy for a man who had a car and an apartment. Some even called Iran a “homosexual paradise” (interview with JP, July 30, 2004).

Many Westerners remained confused about the place of homosexuality in Iranian society and assumed these changes meant greater tolerance for a gay lifestyle. In the mid-1990s, police ignored men who picked up other men in the parks and public arenas for sex, but there was no formal legal or social tolerance for an openly gay lifestyle in Iran. In 1996, the Swedish government denied the petition of a gay Iranian for asylum on the grounds that homosexuality was an acceptable cultural practice. The Swedish government based its claim on a secret report of its embassy in Tehran. The report claims:

The situation for homosexuals is that the risk for legal proceedings or harassment is utterly minimal as long as a homosexual relationship is handled in a discreet manner ... The police and justice administration do not take active measures to investigate into the existence of homosexuality, nor do they actively hunt homosexuals. All in all, the situation in practice in Iran is drastically different from the impression conveyed by the *shari‘a*-inspired Penal Code ... the situation in Iran is relatively tolerant, since homosexuality is by no means unusual in Iran. Certain “health clubs” in Tehran are e.g. known to be frequented by homosexuals. Furthermore, it is by no means unusual to meet openly homosexual persons under otherwise heterosexual, private circumstances like social events. Judging by appearances, diplomats with a homosexual orientation posted in Iran have not had any problems to get in touch with “partners” in Iran. If anything, the situation is rather that homosexuals can conceal their orientation more easily in Iran than e.g. in Sweden, as physical contact between men – embracing, cheek-kissing, handholding – is culturally accepted behavior. [So, to be punished,] a homosexual

couple must behave with great indiscretion, almost provocatively, in a public place. (“Activist Stunned by Swedish” 1996)<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in matters of sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual), the Islamist state rejected many modern gender constructs but endured and often encouraged other, premodern ones. Polygamy, temporary marriage, and covert homosexuality – that is, hierarchical social relations where one partner is subservient to the other – were allowed and, in the first two cases, promoted, while more egalitarian heterosexual or homosexual relations (feminist and gay/lesbian rights) were pushed back. The Iranian gay activist Saviz Shafaie summarizes how these policies affected personal relations:

There is conditional permission for erotic games or even rape as an exercise of male power. Pretend it is a joke, or a put-down, and you can get by. But call it true love or honest and real sexual desire, and you are in trouble. If you cross beyond traditional sex regulations and fail to prove that your ultimate desire is dominating a woman, you would be considered a subject. If you act upon your passionate lust and disclaim it, you are safer than claiming an honest love ... Such sex is not based on mutual agreement, mutual freedom of choice, mutual political power, or mutual feeling and desire. When only one person controls an encounter by forcing another to submit, it sounds more like sexual exploitation and rape rather than a healthy sexual attraction. (Cited in Nichols 1997)

Shafaie’s statement calls to mind Suzanne Pharr’s essay, “Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism.” Pharr argues that opposition to gay rights stems from misogyny, and that openly gay men are threatening because their relationships challenge patterns of domination/submission in traditional heterosexual relations, and, we might add, status-defined homosexuality (Pharr 2001, 148). Shafaie confirms this analysis, based on the situation in Iran’s Islamic Republic:

When women are labeled and treated as inferior to men, any woman or any person assumed to have woman-like qualities is devalued. The assumption that homosexuals are feminine and less than manly justifies a domineering man’s aggression against them. Sexual liberation would not be possible in Iran without challenging “masculine” values and traditions that work against equality between sexual partners. (Cited in Nichols 1997)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In the 1980s there were persistent rumors that European governments often sent their gay diplomats to Iran since life for wives of married diplomats was difficult and many married men turned down such assignments. This document has since been removed from the website.

<sup>12</sup> Shafaie (1950–2000) went to Shiraz University and later received a graduate degree in Sociology from Syracuse University. He campaigned for peace and justice as an Iranian gay activist. His mother Mahin was his staunch supporter and often appeared on the same platform with him in defense of gay rights in Iran. Thanks to Mahin Shafaie and Arsham Parsi for background information on Shafaie.

By implementing these policies, the state aimed to discourage modern trends toward companionate marriage and a modern gay/lesbian lifestyle. However, many citizens resisted these trends, while others began to use them to their own advantage. Modernity had left a lasting impact on Iranian society that could not easily be reversed, especially in a globalized age.

## Conclusion: Toward a new Muslim-Iranian sexuality for the twenty-first century

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The lives of Iranian women changed substantially from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. By 2007, the mean age at first marriage for women had gone up to 24 (from 19.7 in 1976), and more than 78 percent married after the age of 20. Literacy rates among girls and boys exceeded 95 percent, a majority of college students were women, the fertility rate had dropped to 2.0, and the infant mortality rate was 28 per 1,000 live births.

Although young men and women continued to consult and negotiate with parents about prospective partners, marriage increasingly became a prerogative of individual choice. Urban and rural youth formed friendships in public areas, universities, and workplaces despite Islamist prohibitions against the mingling of unrelated men and women. Cyberspace became a sphere where women dared speak about their intimate concerns, including sexual ones, often writing under pseudonyms. Among the more cosmopolitan middle classes, virginity was no longer crucial. Greater access to automobiles afforded more privacy, allowing more women to become sexually active before marriage. In some instances, young women negotiated to have premarital sex that maintained virginity or had access to safe but expensive hymenoplasty. Many parents in middle-class families accepted these facts, but more for sons than daughters.

No longer seen as mainly an institution for procreation, marriage now offered women possibilities for companionship, including emotional and sexual intimacy. Love was celebrated loudly and passionately. Valentine's Day became a major celebration and couples took ads in popular journals, expressing their eternal devotion for one another. Contraceptives became widely available, and condoms were sold by vendors in the *bazaar* and neighborhood stores. While parents still helped their sons and daughters with wedding preparations and costs, young people played an active role in choosing their spouses. Despite its illegality, even cohabitation among romantically involved but unmarried young people had gained a degree of social acceptance in more cosmopolitan urban areas. Iranian society also had become far less accepting of covert male bisexuality, while at the same time it was not ready to accept a

modern gay lifestyle. Still, within small circles in Tehran and other cities, a small, clandestine gay subculture had emerged. Thus many elements of a sexual revolution were already in place in Iran.

### **Risky sex, unhappy marriages, and divorce**

However, other social indicators suggested a grimmer picture, with exceedingly high rates of unprotected sex, marital unhappiness, unemployment, prostitution, drug addiction, and suicide. Although premarital sex was becoming more common among urban youth, this change impacted young women and men very differently. Young women had neither adequate legal protection from sexual molestation and rape, nor were they exposed to strong feminist frameworks healthy that would have allowed them to develop a sense of personal autonomy. As Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi point out, this was an “Iranian sexual liberation on masculine terms”:

Rejecting the traditional Islamic conception of patriarchal authority (and its corollary obligation of the man to respect the honor of the woman), but without an indigenous modern conception of feminine power (i.e., feminism), these young women find themselves free to experience the insidious double standard of their own and their society’s masculinist orientation. This is the recognizably modern version of gender inequality: the right of the woman to be held accountable for her own relative lack of power. (Moruzzi and Sadeghi 2006, 28)

A similar situation prevailed within marriage. As women became more convinced of the importance of their emotional and sexual needs, and found themselves seldom satisfied in marriages still marked by blatant gender inequality, they searched desperately for a way out. Greater longevity and better health actually contributed to this increase in relative unhappiness. By 2005, general life expectancy was seventy, which meant that marriages might last fifty years or longer. Despite laws that made female-initiated divorce extremely difficult, urban divorce rates gradually increased. Marital conflicts also contributed to high levels of mental disorder among women. In 2002, the first extensive study of mental health in Iran concluded that nearly 26 percent of women, compared to 15 percent of men, suffered from mental illnesses (Madani-Ghahfarokhi 2004, 82–86; “Jozveh-ye Hoquqi” 2006).

According to Saeid Madani-Ghahfarokhi, editor-in-chief of the Tehran-based *Social Welfare Quarterly* (*Faslnameh-ye Refah-e Ejtema’i*), the average national rate of divorce was 120 per 1,000 marriages, while that in Tehran was more than 200 per 1,000, or one in every five marriages. At a national level, some 50 percent of divorces took place during the first year of marriage. Also nearly half of all divorces stemmed from



Figure 12.1 Woman chasing man: “You don’t love me!,” 2007

sexual problems and incompatibilities.<sup>1</sup> At the 2005 annual meeting of the Iranian Sociological Association, Dr. Hussein Aghajani reported that, given the opportunity, 50 percent of Iranian women would file for divorce. He attributed this change to increased levels of education, the decreasing influence of the extended family, smaller numbers of children, and the growing desire for intimacy and companionship in marriage (Fig. 12.1). Of course, to become a reality, such inclinations toward divorce would require a host of favorable concomitant circumstances, such as women’s steady employment, financial security, and the ability to gain custody of their children (“Taghyir-e Sabk-e Zendegi” 2005, 77–78; Ezazi 1998, 48–51).

In the absence of adequate employment opportunities for women, even among the more educated urban middle classes, women desirous of both financial security and emotional and sexual compatibility sometimes resorted to a rebellious and dangerous marital strategy in order to have both. A young woman from an urban middle-class family with low

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Madani-Ghahfarokhi for information on this subject and other statistics discussed in this chapter via numerous e-mails in 2007–2008. See also Madani-Ghahfarokhi 2004, 81; Madani-Ghahfarokhi *et al.* in press; “Ellat-e ‘Panjah Darsad’” 2008; “Talaq dar Iran” 2008.

## عشق همسر یا عشق مهریه



Figure 12.2 “Love for husband or for *mahriyeh*?” 2006

prospects would accept the marriage offer of her wealthiest (and usually most conventional and oldest) suitor, and would negotiate a huge *mahriyeh*. But, a month after the wedding, she would sue for her *mahriyeh*. In the Islamic Republic, a woman’s right to her *mahriyeh* remains one of her few rights in marriage, though a husband cannot be imprisoned for nonpayment (Mir-Hosseini 1993, 83). Often he paid a portion of it and the marriage unraveled, though seldom without violence. Then the young woman married another man, someone who was perhaps less well off, but who had more in common with her (Fig. 12.2).

In the industrialized world, more educated women who had found steady employment and financial security were opting out of dysfunctional marriages by the late twentieth century (Coontz 2005, 252–262). Social statistics seemed to confirm a similar trend for Iran. In 2001, more women (nearly 40 percent) than men (35 percent) initiated petitions for divorce (Madani-Ghahfarokhi 2004, 82–86). By 2008, twice as many women as men were petitioning for divorce (“Talaq dar Iran” 2008). However, since well-paid jobs for women were very difficult to find, and Iranian society as a whole remained intolerant of young divorcées, many women felt they had no choice but to remain in unhappy and even violent marriages.

Child marriages had substantially decreased but not disappeared. In rural southeastern province of Baluchestan and Sistan, parents still arranged temporary marriages before puberty for their sons or daughters.



In 2008, the number of such marriages was estimated at around 30,000 nationwide (“Amar-e Bala-ye Ezdevaj” 2008).

### **Unemployment and emigration**

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, unemployment rates for both men and women were escalating. The percentage of women in the paid labor force remained exceedingly low, 13 percent, compared to other Muslim nations such as Turkey (over 25 percent) or Indonesia (over 38 percent), although Iranian women continued to participate in the mostly unpaid rural and nomadic agriculture. According to the Ministry of Planning and Policy Affairs, 43 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two who had joined the paid labor force remained jobless (“Iran Official: Unemployment” 2003; Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam 2006).

Pervasive unemployment pushed many young educated men to emigrate abroad, which decreased the number of socially and financially qualified men available for marriage. Iran had one of the highest “brain drains” in the world in the early twenty-first century. Each year, between 100,000 and 250,000 educated young people left the country, and many chose not to return. The state encouraged emigration to ease unemployment (Amuzegar 2004). High oil prices allowed the government to spend more on domestic social programs, but these expenditures did not contribute very much to economic development, let alone job creation. Instead, they served to increase inflation. Favoritism and government corruption continued unabated. The state awarded large contracts to members of the Pasdaran and Basij in exchange for their political backing. At the same time, growing internal consumption and aging production facilities limited Iran’s capacity to export oil (Mouawad 2007; “Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad’s” 2007, 11). During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, which coincided with the second term of George W. Bush (2004–2008), political relations with the West steadily deteriorated, a situation that led to increased sanctions against Iran and worsened the economy.

### **Runaway girls, prostitutes, drug addicts, and suicide**

The confluence of high unemployment, inflation, emigration, and idealistic expectations about marriage led to an increase in risky behaviors, especially among young women, significant numbers of whom fell into prostitution, drug addiction, or suicide. Since the year 2000, more than 11,000 girls have annually run away from home. Many left their families, hoping to find a companionate marriage. Instead, alone and destitute,

they became prostitutes and drug addicts and joined the growing sex industry in the large cities and the Persian Gulf emirates (Sapa-DPA 2002; Madani-Ghahfarokhi *et al.* in press).

Prostitution became a regulated activity, involving adult women, girls, and boys. Nearly a quarter of those entering prostitution had contracted a temporary marriage. Despite this, in 2007 the Judiciary submitted new legislation to the Seventh Parliament that further facilitated temporary marriage. (International Campaign 2008, 10). Often state authorities were complicit in promoting prostitution. General Reza Zarei, Tehran's Chief of Police and a strong enforcer of morality regulations on the streets, was himself a client of prostitutes. In 2008, he was found in a brothel with six sex workers whom he had asked to pray naked before him and was subsequently arrested (Sigarchi 2008). Some government officials directly benefited from the sex trade and several police raids on brothels revealed the involvement of local officials and security officers (Hughes 2004; "Child Prostitution Ring" 2005).

Newspapers and tabloid periodicals published sensational accounts of girls sold into brothels across the border into Pakistan, Afghanistan, Dubai, and elsewhere. Other runaways became sex workers in the religious centers of Qom, Najaf, and Karbala, usually operating under the guise of *sigheh* marriage partners. In press interviews, the girls reported that they left home to escape strict parents who refused to accept modern gender norms, or because they were attracted by the allure of city life ("A Shocking Report" 2002). The Iranian public, however, saw the runaway phenomenon as a product of the breakdown of the patriarchal family structure, widespread unemployment, and the easy availability of drugs.

Illegal narcotics had become big business, with domestic annual sales figures estimated at \$10 billion for 2005 alone. Drug traffickers used Iran as a transit point between Afghanistan and Europe and the Persian Gulf. In 2005, Iran had the highest rate of drug abuse in the world, with 2.8 percent of the population over fifteen years of age involved with illicit drug use.<sup>2</sup> Many Iranians were convinced that the state was deliberately addicting the youth in order to divert their anger, frustration, and energy away from the shortcomings of the society. For their part, young people claimed they used illicit drugs due to boredom and the lack of entertainment (Vick 2005; "Iran Tops World Addiction-Rate List" 2005).

Both prostitution and intravenous drug use had contributed to an increase in the rates of HIV/AIDS. Attempts to curb the spread of the

<sup>2</sup> Only two other countries passed the 2 percent rate, Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan.

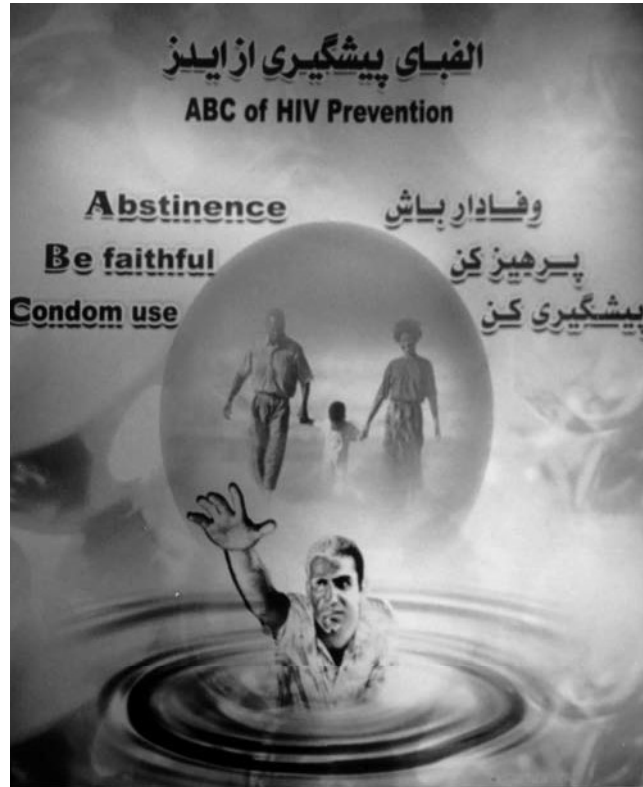


Figure 12.3 AIDS poster at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, 2005

virus were inefficient because the state refused to adopt measures that might interfere with men's sexual pleasure. According to the country's top AIDS specialist, Dr. Hamid Ahmadi, the government reached out to the intravenous drug users but "piously ignored the danger posed by a recent rise in prostitution and casual sex" including temporary marriage (Bellaigue 2005). Married women contracted the HIV virus from their husbands, but the state did not publicize this fact, although it did advocate use of condoms (Meisami 2007; Marashi 2007) (Fig. 12.3).

The growing rate of female suicide constituted another grim indicator of the marriage crisis in Iran. In 2000, the average rate of suicide stood at 25–30 per 100,000 people ("Mental Health" 2007). Most were rural, married women in violent or otherwise unhappy marriages. Research on other parts of the world has shown that women attempt suicide more

often, while men are more successful in their attempts to kill themselves. However, rural Iranian women who took their lives chose the method of self-immolation. Not only was it often fatal, but even if not, it caused serious injury and permanent disfiguration. Manijeh Ziba'i, a member of a rural council in the western, Kurdish-speaking province of Ilam, where some 350 women set themselves on fire in 2001 alone, reported that the new generation's "awareness of their social and human needs and the depression they feel due to the unattainable nature of these desires," combined with excessive poverty, contributed to the frequency with which Ilami women were committing suicide. A community doctor suggested that women chose self-immolation to ensure that their cries of desperation were at least heard in death if not in life (Amiri 2001, 11).

### **Companionate marriages and divorce**

In much of the West the trend toward more companionate marriages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was accompanied by legal changes that granted women more rights in marriage, and established equal inheritance, community property, and rights to employment and divorce, as well as child custody. Initially, the new emphasis on marital love may have increased women's emotional dependence on marriage. But by the late nineteenth century, a growing women's rights movement began to demand rights for women both inside and outside marriage, enabling women to leave marriage or to decline to enter it. In the twentieth century, the growing participation of Western women in the economy, and the wages they brought home, served to promote more egalitarian relations in marriage. This process also made marriage more optional and divorce more acceptable. The numbers of married couples continued to decrease, but those who remained married expressed greater satisfaction in their relationships. By 1980, the divorce rate stood at 50 percent in the United States, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century one in every three children was born to an unmarried woman, usually in a cohabiting relationship with a man.<sup>3</sup>

In Iran, the child-centered institution of marriage endured for the vast majority. Both fathers and mothers forfeited numerous pleasures, such as vacations and daily luxuries, in order for their children to receive a better education and to start married life with greater financial security. Many middle-class parents mortgaged their property to enable a son (and sometimes a daughter) to study abroad, knowing that their child might never return. Mothers and grandmothers remained the bedrock of Iranian

<sup>3</sup> Coontz 2005, 255, 264 and e-mail exchanges with her on April 3, 2007. Also Amato *et al.* 2007, 25–31.

society, and their sacrifices went beyond the call of duty. Wives stood up to husbands so that daughters could remain in school a little longer. Mothers encouraged daughters to study hard and repeatedly asked them to “make something of themselves” and not become just housewives. Working-class, middle-class, and even upper-class Iranian grandmothers took on extraordinary responsibilities to enable their married daughters to finish college and receive graduate degrees. They took care of their grandchildren and watched over their homework. They shopped and cooked endlessly for their daughters’ families and in-laws, thus allowing their daughters to comply with entertainment customs requiring elaborate home-cooked meals. Many women gained tremendous satisfaction through contributing to their children’s accomplishments; however, they often resented their husbands and felt trapped in unhappy unions where men did not appreciate women’s efforts, and had overwhelming legal advantages.

Women continued to have fewer personal legal rights than men, and their position in matrimony remained highly precarious. Fathers could still arrange marriages for their daughters before age thirteen, with court permission, and some still did so in isolated rural areas. Husbands still had veto power over their wives’ occupations, could prevent them from visiting friends or traveling abroad, and could decide unilaterally on the couple’s place of domicile. A woman still faced the possibility of sharing her husband with a second wife. Women experienced denial of child custody and destitution if divorced. In December 2008, the Eighth Parliament finally granted widows the right to inherit land from their deceased husbands. Still unequal inheritance laws, lack of community property in marriage, and horrific state punishments for female adulterers gave men significant advantages. In 2007, in response to angry husbands and their relatives, the judiciary introduced a new prenuptial agreement that conditioned the payment of *mahr* upon men’s financial ability, thus closing off one of the last favorable aspects of the *shari‘a* for women (“Jozveh-ye Hoquqi” 2006). In 2008, despite vocal opposition by women’s rights groups and liberal clerics such as Ayatollah Sana‘i, Parliament gave its preliminary approval to a bill that encouraged polygamy by eliminating the right of the first wife to block her husband’s second marriage. The Ahmadinejad government and the conservative Eighth Parliament extolled a greater resort to polygamy as a solution to pervasive female unemployment (“Layeh” 2008).

### **Gender segregation and homosexuality**

Gender-segregation rules continued to be observed, not only because of state enforcement but also because of deeply ingrained social and

religious anxieties. In their campaigns around women's rights issues, even feminists seldom mentioned the *hijab* regulations. If they did, it was usually in relation to non-Muslim women, questioning why non-Muslims were forced to observe them ("Jozveh-ye Hoquqi" 2006). In the summer of 2008 sociologist Fatemeh Sadeghi broke this silence by publishing a powerful essay, "Why We Say No to Forced *Hijab*." Sadeghi talked about her own experience growing up in an Islamist family in the 1980s and wearing the *hijab* and the veil from a young age. What made the essay so remarkable was that Sadeghi was the daughter of Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali (d. 2003), the infamous Chief Justice of the Islamic Republic known in the early days of the revolution as the "hanging judge." Now his daughter declared that the veil "had nothing to do with morality and religion. It is all about power" (Sadeghi 2008, 10).

Concerns about ritual purity had not disappeared entirely. Many men continued to believe that sexual experience tainted a woman. It was as if the semen, once having entered her body, irrevocably marked her as impure. A married woman's sexual life was tolerated because it pleased her husband and produced legitimate children, but the sexual activities of single, divorced, or widowed women were constant sources of anxiety. The frequent use of terms such as *cleanliness* or *purity* (*paki*; *pakdamani*) with regard to women also indicated the persistence of such thinking within Iranian culture. Of course, Iranians were not unique in clinging to such views about sexual purity, which appeared in different guises in various religions and cultures. In some parts of the United States, legal prohibitions against miscegenation (interracial sex) had continued well into the era of the civil rights movement, while a substantial sector of public opinions remained opposed long after that.

In the West, the gradual adoption of normative heterosexuality was followed by the slow recognition of adult homosexuality. Even so, homosexuality remained controversial in the United States and influenced the election to the presidency of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, with decisive support from the religious right. In Iran, heterosexuality became the norm, but a gay lifestyle has yet to be recognized. Same-sex relations remained semi-covert, and some apparently heterosexual marriages remained, in effect, bisexual relationships. From time to time, the Islamist state hanged gay men, charging them with rape and pedophilia, thereby ensuring a lack of public sympathy for them.

### **One Million Signatures Campaign and state response**

These sexual prejudices enjoyed wide support beyond rural areas of Iran. Many urban, intellectual men who campaigned for democracy and

human rights were not yet ready to support equal rights for women in divorce, custody, inheritance, or property law; nor were they willing to recognize the rights of sexual minorities. Liberal theologians who campaigned against the Islamist orthodoxy were reluctant to challenge regulations involving public social interaction between men and women. Noted reform theologians such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, who boldly challenged the state's ideology, refused to shake hands with women, even at academic conferences and private gatherings abroad. Most also condemned a gay lifestyle. Thus, gender and sexuality remained highly contentious issues and continued as major focal points of modern Iranian politics.

One source of hope, however, was the country's educated urban and rural women, many of whom knew from experience that social activism could change things. Some had been budding feminists during the late Pahlavi era, some had joined the revolution as leftists or Islamists but were now increasingly conscious of women's rights issues, some were volunteer health providers in the rural areas who successfully promoted family-planning initiatives, and some were children of the revolution. The latter group comprised high-school and college students and graduates who had experienced a greater degree of autonomy in their private lives and who wished to close the enormous gap between the private and public realms.

When members of the security police violently attacked a peaceful women's rights demonstration on June 12, 2006, a small cluster of Iranian feminists in Tehran formed the Campaign for Equality and embarked on the grassroots One Million Signatures Campaign. Taking a page from Moroccan feminists, they blended traditional Middle Eastern practices of gathering petitions, the consciousness-raising techniques of American feminists in the 1970s, and contemporary methods of access to the Internet and electronic newsletters, in order to launch a movement to change laws restricting women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance, among others.<sup>4</sup>

By March 2007, nearly 400 trained young women were going to private homes, doctors' offices, buses, trains, parks, restaurants, and elsewhere carrying petitions and asking for the signatures of ordinary women as well as men. Whether they signed or not, each person received a brochure explaining the legal inequalities facing women in plain language and with examples (Casey 2007). The movement did not call for the overthrow

<sup>4</sup> For the 1992 campaign of Moroccan women, see "Morocco" 2001; Keddie 2007, 144–148. For details on the Iranian campaign, I have relied on numerous e-mails and newsletters by Parvin Ardalan, Noushin Ahmad-Khorasani, Sussan Tahmasebi, and others in the campaign.

of the state, nor did it challenge the *shari'a* directly. Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, one of the organizers, points out that, unlike secular feminists who opposed religion as a source for gender norms, and Islamic feminists who tried to fit feminism within an Islamic framework, this generation saw Islam, "whether one likes it or not," as a part of people's lives and accepted it as a reality. This generation also tried to read the religious texts strategically and to encourage the reinterpretation of orthodox and patriarchal readings of Islam in light of women's rights concerns ("Jozveh-ye Hoquqi" 2006).

In the summer of 2008, and in response to the One Million Signatures Campaign, the government of Ahmadinejad proposed a deceptively-worded bill which like the 1967/1975 law was called the "Family Protection Law." Three provisions of the 2008 bill increased men's privileged position in marriage and divorce. Article 53 would have abolished all components of the 1967/75 Family Protection Law not previously eliminated by the Islamic Republic. Article 23 would have eased polygamy by giving a wealthy man the right to take a second *'aqdi* without permission of his first wife, requiring only court approval. Article 25 would have taxed a woman's "excessive" *mahr-riyeh*. The tax on *mahr-riyeh* was an attempt to reduce a wife's bargaining position in marriage and during divorce proceedings.

The media reported that the bill would have taken away the right of a first wife to prevent a husband's second formal marriage. However, the bill was more harmful to women than reported in the media. The Iranian state has never given the first wife the right to block a second wife, not even during the Pahlavi era, when she gained only the right to sue for divorce rather than live in a polygamous formal marriage. In the Pahlavi era, a man was required to obtain his first *'aqdi*'s permission, and that of the court, for a second marriage. If she refused to give permission and he went ahead anyway, he might be jailed for six months to a year, but his second marriage was still valid. Thus, a first wife has never had an ironclad right to block or undo her husband's second marriage. All she could do was sue for divorce. Under the Islamic Republic, at least since 1984, the first wife with a properly executed prenuptial agreement can once again sue for divorce if her husband marries a second *'aqdi*. It remains unclear what the 2008 bill would do to this right of the first wife, if it were ultimately ratified.

In late August 2008, a coalition of prominent Iranian women, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, the noted poet Simin Behbahani, former Reformist MP Elahee Koolaee, and the celebrated film director Rakhshan Bani E'temad joined together with progressive clerics and politicians to meet with Members of Parliament and protest the proposed new law. Feeling the pressure, the Parliamentary Judicial Committee agreed to drop the controversial articles, temporarily shelving what would have





Figure 12.4 Women's rights demonstration, the caption reads "Women's rights equals human rights," 2006

been a major setback for women. Many advocates of women's rights still feared that the bill would be reintroduced at some later point.

Despite these obstacles the Campaign for Equality continues to move ahead and has broken new ground on several levels. Activists have moved beyond the sectarian and ideological divides that hampered the women's movement for much of the twentieth century. They have made common cause with women from many different social, religious, and ideological backgrounds, established a genuine two-way conversation that has broken

with both elitism and populism, and formulated demands that appeal to women of all social classes. They have also reclaimed a number of national and religious rituals and festivals, giving them new feminist interpretations (Tohidi 2008). Most of all, they have tried to change not just the law, but also the culture itself, and to articulate an independent feminist voice that demarcates “the women’s movement from both the native Islamists and Western imperialist patriarchies” (Tohidi 2006). This last point is crucial. For too long, Western imperialist powers, most recently the United States, have opportunistically used the issue of the rights of Middle Eastern women for their strategic interests and abandoned it just as opportunistically when it no longer fit their purposes.

At the same time, the Iranian regime understands the power of the country’s century-old women’s movement and has used myriad strategies to stifle the Million Signatures Campaign. Activists are beaten, arrested, and thrown in jail, and then released; major newspapers are barred from covering the campaign or shut down outright; organizations that provide activists with a platform receive ominous warnings, and the cyberspace sites of the campaign are routinely shut down. By early 2009, the campaign was moving on slowly but defiantly, challenging a history of oppression and inequality, and seeking to change the position of Iranian women, one mind and one signature at a time (Fig. 12.4).