

The Women's Movement in Iran:

Women at the Crossroads
of Secularization
and Islamization
Homa Hoodfar

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About the Author:

Homa Hoodfar teaches at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Concordia University in Montreal, Canada and is the coordinator of the Iran Module of the Women and Law programme of Women Living Under Muslim Laws Network

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Homa Hoodfar

Since the success of the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, images of Iranian women have come to epitomize the worst kind of retrogressive oppression, symbolized by compulsory veiling, polygyny, and the exclusion of women from public life. Rendering the situation especially alarming is that these measures are supposedly prescribed by God and "Islam", and are thus not negotiable. With the spread of Islamist movements and their unprecedented attention to women's roles and position, these images have been sobering for women activists and others who concern themselves with women's issues in many societies.

However, developments in Iran have been far more complex than the frequently simple, often orientalist analyses suggest. Despite a series of legal setbacks for women, close examination of empirical evidence belies much of the grim picture painted of the situation of women in Iran. Although women are today barely present in upper management level in Iran, issues concerning women (and the family) have become some of Iran's most politicized topics since the revolution. Thanks to the relentless work of both secularist and Islamist women activists, and the continuous participation of thousands of women in street and parliamentary politics, politicians - whether traditionalist, conservative or revisionist - acknowledge that they cannot afford to overlook women as a significant political constituency. Never in Iran's patriarchal history have male politicians been so watchful of or attentive to women's political behaviour and views, which currently appear to threaten the historical, patriarchal Iranian world view. The intriguing question thus emerges as to what social and political conditions have given rise to this unprecedented situation.

Political and social context determines the strategies activists adopt in order to bring about desired legal and social changes. During the

process of establishing Iran's first constitution in 1906, the conservative patriarchal elements frequently made political use of "Islam" to erect obstacles to women's demands for equity and full legal and social person-hood, and this tendency persisted with renewed force during the constitution of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Thus it is not surprising that a considerable sector of women's activism in Iran employs not secular debates on women's rights but female-centred interpretations of Islam and of the political concept of "Islamic justice". Through this strategy, women not only derail the claim that feminism and issues of legal equity are Western paradigms which aim to undermine the authenticity of Iranian society, but they also break the male monopoly on interpreting Islamic texts.

In Europe and North America, feminists have been engaged in reformulating conceptual frames of reference in the areas of science and secular philosophy so that they apply to women as well as men (Pateman 1988, Weitzman 1981, Mouffe 1991, Phillips 1993). Through research and "rational" debate they have successfully challenged misconceptions about women's "natural" ability and social place. While their experience and achievements are valuable to women in Iran and in the Muslim world generally, to improve their lot, Iranian women activists have chosen to advance feminist Islamic theology and feminist Islamic jurisprudence, as it is these historically male-dominated institutions and their male-centred understanding of Islam, and not science per se, that hold women hostage. Thus, while the intent of this paper is to provide a brief overview of women's movement(s) in Iran, the particular attention has been paid to the strategies women activists have adopted at different historical periods to promote gender debates both among the politicians and activists, and also society at large. The paper thus outlines the social and political conditions that have led not only to the development of secular feminist perspectives in Iran, but to the emergence of woman-centred Islamists and their strategies which aim, thus far with considerable success, to fundamentally challenge conventional gender visions often presented as "Islamic." This analysis of the gender debates in Iran, and by extension elsewhere in the Muslim world, reiterates that Islam, particularly as a political ideology, is far from static and unchanging; it is a dynamic and evolving ideological force that is being

constructed and reconstructed in the hands of diverse political clergy, and more recently by Islamist feminists and the wider society.¹

The Historical Overview

By the late nineteenth century, debate around women's issues and women's socioeconomic situation in Iran had become widespread among intellectuals, modernists, nationalists, and anti-colonial forces (Sansarian 1982, Paidar 1995). However, in Iran, these debates lacked the intensity that accompanied them in such countries as Egypt and Turkey (Abdel-Kader 1988, Badran 1995, Ilkaracan 1996, Tekeli 1995, Jayawardena 1986). This may in part be attributable to Iran's linguistic isolation relative to the rest of the Arab world, and to the fact that Shi'i was never a part of the Ottoman world. Iran also had lesser contact with the European world, for despite great rivalry over Iran among English, French, and Russian imperial powers for influence and control, Iran was never formally colonized. Nor did Iran, a much smaller entity, experience a decline in international power vis-a-vis Europe as did the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. More importantly perhaps was that Iran experienced relatively small-scale economic and social structural changes compared with its Turkish and Egyptian counterparts. In fact, many modernist and reformist ideas were transmitted to Iran via considerable contact between Iranian intellectuals and their counterparts in Istanbul and Cairo.²

1. It is important to note that generally Islamist gender activists do not claim to be feminists and in fact often emphasise that they are *not* feminists. This in part stems from their desire to distance themselves from the negative construction of feminism as a "western" import irrelevant to the lives of Iranian women. However, since feminism is rooted in the social realities of women in all their diversity, and thus inherently entails a wide variety of perspectives, in this work I use feminist to refer to those who are conscious that women are denied certain rights *because* they are women, and who are intent upon improving this situation. Because that is exactly what the Islamist gender activists have been engaged in I refer to them as feminists. Nevertheless there are disagreements among social scientists as to the appropriateness of considering these as feminists. Some have preferred to use the term gender conscious activists (Moghadam 1993).

2. While Iran shared neither a language nor a common history with other countries in the region, many Persian books were published in Istanbul, and Istanbul, like Cairo, was home to a large community of Iranian intellectuals, many of whom had fallen into disfavour with the shah or the clergy.

While Ottoman religious and state institutions were ceremonially separate, both were ultimately under the authority of the sultan. In contrast, prior to the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the shi'i clergy in Iran was financially independent and received its legitimacy from public support.³ Invariably, religious leaders sided with the public to protect them against the excesses of the ruling dynasties — monarchs with absolute power — who depended on religious leaders for their legitimacy (Keddie 1981). However their relationship with those modernists and intellectuals with democratic tendencies were more complex. While on occasion, they joined forces to resist the state despite the ideological gulf between them, at other times they would join forces with the absolutist state to eliminate forward looking politicians and educators. Their hostility to Amir Kabir, the modernist first minister of the Shah (1801-1848) and Roshdiah (1846-1947), the tireless educationalist, are good examples. In effect the clergy as a strata were more concerned with protecting their own interest and power including their monopoly over public education and the judiciary system from the encroachment of the state and the increasingly more vocal public.⁴ Initially, aside from issues concerning women and gender relations, religious leaders did not see a contradiction between modernity or the adoption of a parliamentary political system which allowed for public participation, and their religious perspective, as long as these did not interfere with their authority. Given the limited ability of reformists to mobilize the public, and the reformist's need to preserve their alliance with the religious leaders against the absolute monarch, even those modernists who advocated the improvement of women's position tended to adopt a more compromising attitude than their counterparts in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.⁵

3. See Fischer 1980, Keddie 1981.

4. For example during the Tobacco movement against the British monopoly over the tobacco trade (1880's), and Constitutional movements (1906), clergy and nationalists worked closely together. On the other hand once the parliamentary movement succeeded, the clergy tried to impose their control over the elected parliament. I am indebted to A. Hoodfar and A. Afkhami for bringing some of these contradictions to my attention.

5. For more detailed discussion see Afary 1996 and Hoodfar 1999.

The public debate around political reforms and women's social and legal position remained primarily a male one.⁶ Although women did participate in considerable numbers in early nationalist movements, history has largely overlooked their contributions until recently, when more detailed accounts are gradually emerging (Afary 1996, Bamdad 1977, Shuster 1912, Bayat-Phillipp 1978). During the Tobacco Movement, when a coalition of nationalists, merchants, and religious leaders mobilized the public and demanded the cancellation of concessions made by Nasruddin Shah (1848-1896) to the British, women participated in oppositional meetings and street demonstrations and marched at the front of the protesters who walked to the palace (Keddie 1966, Sansarian 1982, Paidar 1995). By all accounts, such participation was an unprecedented and unconventional act for women who were normally expected to remain in the domestic domain (Keddie 1966, Paidar 1995).

Considerable numbers of women, many of whom were closely related by marriage or blood to progressive and politically active men, actively supported the constitutional movement that sought to limit the absolute power of the Shah and establish a parliamentary system. Women formed many secret and semi-secret associations that supported the nationalist and constitutionalist movement (Paidar 1995, Afary 1996). They helped to organize strikes and boycotts, to spread news, and to encourage the public to protest against the influence of foreigners and the despotic rule of the Shah (Afary 1996, Bamdad 1977, Bayat-Philip 1978, Paidar 1995, Shuster 1912). In 1905, women formed a human shield for the *ulama* who had taken sanctuary in a shrine near Tehran.⁷ However when the movement was finally successful and the first constitution of Iran was written, women's participation was overlooked and they were denied voting

6. Although more research is needed on the history of women's education in Iran, it appears that formal education for women beyond reading the Qur'an was less common than it was in Egypt and Turkey under the Ottoman Empire (see Sansarian 1982). This might explain the relative dearth of Iranian women's voices in the political and intellectual writing of this period.

7. Given the community's ethics, protestors assumed that it would be much harder for the armed guard to open fire if they had to kill women. However this tactic has not always worked.

rights. Worse yet, none of the gender issues were discussed in the formation of this constitution (Hoodfar 1999).

The denial of women's political rights and prevention of their participation in parliamentary political processes was justified on the grounds that it was against the text of the Quran (Afray 1996, Sansarian 1982). Thus while the political leaders were concerned with transforming men from subjects of the Shah into citizens of Iran, a totally unprecedented and untraditional event, it was not deemed necessary for women to become citizens. Rather, women were viewed as subjects of their fathers and husbands, and their political participation was supposed to be in support of their male kin. While in the west, exclusion of women from political processes was rationalized by philosophers like Hobbes, Kant and Lock, Iranian religious/political leaders merely put a new twist on Quranic interpretation, despite the lack of a single reference to elections in the contemporary sense in the Quran. Ayatollah Mudress, the representative of the grand Mufti (the highest religious authority) in the Majlis, claimed that God had not given women the capacity to engage in politics. God, he claimed, had said in the Quran that women are in the custody of men and may not have the right to vote.⁸ Supported by other clerics, he claimed it was the responsibility of male relatives to ensure that women's rights were not overlooked.⁹ Thus, the use of religion became the foundation for conservatives and those violently against changes in women's roles. In this manner the wheel of exclusion which ensured the legal and political alienation of women from formal processes was already set turning in 1906.

Since the exclusion was alleged to be the order of God and not men, challenging such a view for those lacking theological knowledge was both risky and difficult. Thus it is not surprising that apart from some debate over education, there was little discussion about improving women's legal position. When in 1911 Haji Vakil el-Roaya, an

8. See minutes of Majlis, August 4, 1911. Afray 1996:202-204; Sansarian 1982:23-24.

9. Just as James Mill said "women did not need to have the vote because their interests were subsumed in the interest of their fathers or husbands" (Pateman 1988: 157).

enlightened deputy from Hamedan, made an impassioned speech presenting the idea of legal equity between men and women and demanding that women receive universal franchise, there was an uproar in parliament. The speech was considered so offensive to public mores that it was excluded from the parliamentary record (Afary 1996, Sansarian 1982:23). It met with fierce opposition from conservatives, notably religious leaders. Although debates continued among secular and nationalist forces for the next two decades, little tangible advance was made.

Women's disappointment with the outcome of the constitution motivated activists to focus on women's issues. They formed semi-secret associations to discuss women's concerns and tried to change the situation, primarily through opening schools for girls but also by writing and publishing. Until then, the political mobilization of women had occurred not around gender issues but rather around national matters, which remained a preoccupation. As women's voices and demands found support among more moderate groups and intellectuals, the clergy began to target women's associations (*anjomans*), claiming that they were against *sharia*. More liberal minded members of parliament pointed out that Muslim women had always had their gatherings. Not only was there no religious obstacle to these gatherings, they argued, but there was no reason women should not get together and learn from each other (Afary 1996 and Paidar 1995). For their part women demanded that the women's associations should be legally recognized along with other associations. The legality and legitimacy of women's associations continued to be hotly debated for some time. While many conservatives remained in opposition to the associations, the Grand Ayatollah came short of calling them against *sharia*. The parliament finally recognized their legal status but provided them with no financial support.

Disappointed with the outcome of the constitution, women began to raise funds and establish schools for girls, since the government failed to support their demands for girl's schooling. As these schools became popular among a certain segment of urban households - notably the middle classes, - at the incitement of the conservative clergy, female

teachers and students were frequently harassed, physically and verbally (Bamdad 1977). Ayatollah Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri issued a fatwa (a religious decree) saying that girls' schools were against *sharia* (Bayat-Philipp 1978:300). This was despite the fact that the girls schools had only female teachers and everyone involved conformed to the accepted Islamic dress code. Ayatollah Shushtari organized protests (which included women from the least privileged classes) against women's education and distributed a leaflet entitled "Shame on a country in which girls' schools are founded" (Paidar 1995:70).¹⁰

Women had hoped to avoid hostility from the conservative clergy and to pre-empt the use of Islam as an obstacle to their progress by pointing out the extent to which women's education in Iran lagged behind other Muslim countries in the region,¹¹ as well as Japan, which, for Iranians did and still does represent an example of development without westernization. In a sense, Iranian women were disadvantaged since the Iranian intellectual debates in 1906 around gender issues, particularly from Islamic points of view, were rudimentary in comparison with those in Egypt and Turkey. For instance, *One Leg Crossed Over the Other*, a book in support of women's education by Ahmed Fares Shidyak, was published in Egypt in 1855; Sheik Mohamed Abdouh (1849-1905), who had been influenced by Sayyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's teachings, wrote a pioneering book arguing for a flexible interpretation of the Quran in light of modern thoughts and initiated a debate on religion and women's rights.¹² Qasim Amin, in 1899, published his book, *The*

10. Ayatollah Nuri and other conservative clergy collaborated with the constitutionalists against the Shah but rather than establishing a constitutional political system, they had in mind a form of clericalism where the religious authorities had the ultimate power (Afary 89-115).

11. Indeed, the first girl's school in Istanbul was established in 1858, and women's teacher training began in 1863 (Najabadi 1991:55). Similarly, in Egypt, girls' schools had existed since 1832, and many women's magazines had begun operation before the turn of the century (Jayawardena 1986, Najmabadi 1991, Philipps 1978) -Philipps 1983 or Bayat-Philipp 1978.

12. Sayyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1836-97) was one of the very first intellectual and political ideologues to advocate an indigenous modernism and strongly oppose imperialism. He was probably one of the first intellectuals who distinguished

Emancipation of Women, on the basis of religious texts, which created a heated discussion among conservative sheikhs in Egypt. In response to his critics, he wrote another book, *The New Woman* (Jayawardena 1986:48). These debates, which were influenced by and influenced other Arab countries, and which advanced reformist ideas among the Islamists as well as some clergy, were largely absent from Iranian intellectual discussion despite the considerable influence of Sayyed Jamal al-din al-Afghani (1839-97), the Iranian social reformer and pan-Islamist.

The political motives for the exclusion of women from political power and modern education (as opposed to a genuine concern to avoid deviating from Islamic doctrine) becomes more obvious when we consider that one of the main goals of the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran, where the state is under the complete influence of Islamic clergy, is to improve literacy and educational attainment among women. A commonly heard development slogan is "In a truly Islamic society, there would not be even one illiterate person." In the same light, whether in mosques or other buildings, rooms where adult education classes are held are decorated with the Islamic saying that a Muslim should go as far as China (then the furthest known civilization) in search of knowledge. The primary constituency of these classes is women (Mehran 1991). The obvious question then is, why has the early opposition to women's education justified in the name of Quran and Islam?¹³

Also conspicuously absent in Iran was debate around personal status law, which consumed much energy of politicians, political activists,

between modernism and indigenous social change and a blind process of westernization. He saw Islam as a great source of strength and a uniting force of the region and he advocated an alternative re-interpretation of Islam which lends itself to modernism and progress from within the Muslim countries cultural perspectives as opposed to becoming westernized.

13. This is particularly important because at the time girls schools were not mixed and the teachers employed were female. Moreover, there seemed to be no opposition to women going to maktab (traditional school) where it was generally male mullahs who taught the Quran and other major Persian texts. It is hard not to conclude that the religious leaders were opposing female education because they disapproved of modern education where their influence would be at best marginal.

and intellectuals in Egypt and Turkey (Abdel-Kader 1988, Badran 1995). The conventional *shariah* remained the basis of laws which allowed men to contract polygamous marriages, gain automatic custody of children, and dissolve their marriages unilaterally through divorce. It was not until decades later that a minimum marriage age of 15 was set for girls and the registration of marriage was required.

Despite lack of interest in women's concerns on the part of parliament, women did remain involved in national politics, particularly opposing the intervention of both British and Russian forces who had joined the Shah in trying to close the parliament. They also continued raising funds to set up the first Iranian National Bank in order to free Iran's economy and government from the stranglehold of British influence. Though rarely noted, a review of published newspapers and magazines of the time strongly indicates that the presence of women and their large meetings and occasional public speeches were a major force in maintaining the momentum of the struggle (Afary 1996: 203-205, Shuster 1912, Paidar 1995: 70-76). These public activities provided women with political and organizational experience and helped women develop a political language. The clergy and conservative's opposition to women's demands, particularly to their educational demands, also brought about gender consciousness and encouraged the development of women's political discourse. Women held meetings for the sole purpose of discussing women's issues, and produced polemical writings on women's demands.

The success of the constitutional movement and demands for the democratization of society and expanded development led to the fall of the Quajar dynasty. Despite considerable support for republicanism on the part of many modernists, ultimately the constitution was revised only slightly and the new Pahlavi dynasty, committed to the ideology of modernization, if not democratization, was established. This political change facilitated the spread of the modernist view that to a significant degree women's exclusion from public life and particularly from education was responsible for Iran's loss of economic and political power. A recurrent theme in the debates was that society had made women so feeble that they were

unable to participate in building the national economy; moreover they were also unfit to raise able children, especially capable sons who could build Iran to its deserved glory (Paidar 1995, Najmabadi 1998). Thus they advocated educating and rehabilitating women to be modern wives and mothers.¹⁴

De-veiling and the European dress code as a vehicle of modernization

No major change occurred in the legal position of women during the rule of Reza Shah (1924-1941), but the new regime put considerable emphasis on education, including women's education, as a major vehicle for modernization. This boosted the number of schools for girls and also provided opportunities for educated women to be employed as teachers. An unfortunate related development was the linkage of the dress code and *hijab* to women's education. Modernists insisted that if women were to take part in education and nation building, the veil must be discarded; sometimes they went as far as insisting on the adoption of western clothing and fashion. It was as though women's head gear per se excluded women from intellectual activity: if women put on European styles of clothing, Iran would somehow miraculously transform itself and become European in its other characteristics. The combination of unveiling and education in one package derived at least partly from the elite's awareness that, in the West, the veil had come to symbolize the backwardness of their society (Hoodfar 1997). Not surprisingly, similar concerns also preoccupied other Middle Eastern reformers, particularly in Turkey (Bawd 1996, Tekeli 1995, Fandy 1998; Quataert 1997).

In addition to the fixation on European images of Muslim societies, other factors influenced the emergence of the conviction that the veil and education were an unlikely pair. In Iran as in many other Muslim societies (and particularly among urban elites), patriarchal elements often used the veil (and sometimes still do) as an excuse to curtail

14. Najamabadi (1998) argues that given the political and social context such arguments were strategies for winning support for the cause rather than the actual motivation behind it.

women's mobility and independence. They condemned women to seclusion and to the domestic domain; seclusion and public education were clearly incompatible. Therefore, the underlying criticisms of the reformists should have been directed at the seclusion of women in the name of the veil and not at the head gear as such.

Given that the veil and Islamic ethics have been closely intertwined in Muslim cultures, the combination of unveiling and formal education in one package by reformists and modernizers was a strategic mistake. Conservative forces, including the clergy, seized the opportunity to legitimize their opposition to the proposed changes in the name of religion and galvanized public resistance to education for women. However, the public's opposition was primarily to unveiling.¹⁵ In effect, de-veiling became a battleground on which the westernization forces fought the conservative religious forces with little real concern for Iranian women (Hoodfar 1993).

Finally, in 1936 following Ataturk's example, and as a show of force which indicated the clergy's exclusion from formal political power, Reza Shah's modernization program outlawed the *chador*, the traditional Iranian ankle-length cape which covers women's hair and body (though not the face). It was made illegal to publicly wear any head-gear apart from European hats! It is important to stress that the dress code decree also forced men to wear European clothing, particularly if they were government employees. However, police had strict orders to remove and destroy *chadors* and scarves of women, while male dress code was not so stringently enforced (Sansarian 1982; Hoodfar 1997). Until 1979, the anniversary of the introduction of this law was officially celebrated as Women's Liberation Day in Iran.

15. Clearly, the opposition to women's education reflected a predominant cultural norm rather than unchanging rules or religion. For instance in today's Iran, adult literacy classes, often held in mosques, display posters depicting Islamic approval of education, such as the Prophet's saying that Muslim **men and women** are to go China (which was then the furthest centre of intellectual activities) in search of knowledge. Contrary to expectations that female education would suffer under the Islamic Republic, the gap between women and men's education is closing more rapidly than it did under the Shah, despite falling short of the Islamic regime's claims that this is the Golden Age of education for women (Mehran 1991).

A small number of elite and intellectual women supported and benefited from the unveiling law, and welcomed the change, taking advantage of some of the educational and employment opportunities offered by the modern state. However, because the state had little presence in the countryside, and since most rural women dressed in their traditional clothing, the law had little immediate impact on their lives. On the other hand, for lower middle class and low-income urban women, who were socialized to see veiling, in the form of *chador*, as the only legitimate, acceptable way of dressing, the unveiling law was far from liberating (Hoodfar 1993, Bamdad 1977). Many felt obliged to stay home, and gave up their public activities, including shopping for the family, engaging in economic activity outside the home, visiting neighbours, and worst of all, going to the public baths - a cherished ritual that expanded women's social circles beyond their immediate family and neighbours.¹⁶ The de-veiling law and its harsh enforcement not only failed to liberate women of these classes, but sequestered them and forced them to rely on their husbands, sons, and male relatives for public tasks which they normally carried out themselves.

In the absence of the state's active intervention, low-income and traditional middle class social groups remained under the cultural influence of conservative religious leaders who considered modern schooling to be a source of corruption for girls. They advised parents against educating their daughters. This in part explains, despite decades of free and compulsory education, the low rates of female literacy even in the communities which had educational facilities. After the Second World War and the abdication of Reza Shah (1924-1941) in favour of his son Mohammed Reza Shah, the veil remained illegal although the law's enforcement was relaxed. Gradually, women wearing scarves and *chadors* appeared side by side with those without head-gear.

Despite its draconian imposition, the de-veiling law and modernization increased educational and employment opportunities

16. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of de-veiling on low-income urban groups, see Hoodfar 1997.

for many women and thus paved the way for the redefinition of women's role in society, even among traditional groups (Sansarian 1982; Paidar 1995). After the Second World War, traditionally-dressed women from religious backgrounds gradually began to continue their formal education, arguing that there was no contradiction between observing *hijab* and acquiring an education, and that religious and cultural beliefs did not exclude modernity. This ideological position enabled many women to participate in "modernity" while enjoying the support of their religious families and communities. However, as the veil remained illegal, they remained excluded from employment opportunities in the public and modern sectors of the economy (Hoodfar 1997). Equally, the veil continued to be depicted as a symbol of backwardness and ignorance even though it was widely worn by urban women. Hence, veiled women as a social group continued to feel alienated.

Women's organizations

Although some female intellectuals continued to write on women's questions, the initial zeal and support from their male counterparts rapidly diminished after the de-veiling movement. For reasons that yet need to be studied, independent women's organizations never quite evolved to become a major political force as they did in Egypt or the Philippines. At least in part because so many operated in secrecy for so long, they never developed the organization and mobilization structures. Even during the more liberal period under Reza Shah, independent political groups were not tolerated, including women's organizations, despite the fact that these groups were small and their demands did not conflict with the Shah's views on modernization. Thus, as Reza Shah's government became stronger, many women's groups and organizations fell into disarray, and were either officially dismantled or lost their membership due to strict censorship regarding what they could say or publish. Simultaneously, the state successfully incorporated many vocal and capable women into its structure, making it difficult for women's organizations to maintain their independence.

Isolation from other regional and international women's movements facing similar social and political situations made it difficult for women to learn from the experiences of other women's movements and protect their independence. The most important recorded effort to establish ties with women of the region came from the well organized Patriotic Women's League, which at its height hosted the Oriental Women's Congress in Tehran in 1932.¹⁷ Women from Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, and India participated in the congress and debated issues such as women's education and the abolition of polygamy, a concern they all shared (Sansarian 1982:67-68). Yet, as women's organizations dwindled and Eurocentrism came to dominate women activists' visions in Iran and in many other countries, these regional contacts were not sustained.

The Second World War weakened the ruling regime as the result of Anglo-Russian occupation that forced Reza Shah out of power leaving the state without much power or authority. The precariousness of the state resulted in the relaxation of censorship and attempts to rebuild political parties and women's organizations. Some of the women's journals and publications, notably *Zaban Zanan* (The Women's Language) which had ceased publication, reappeared, along with several new ones. The Women's Centre, the Women's League, and a few smaller organizations appeared on the political scene. Some organizations concentrated on training women in various professions while others had explicit political goals. In 1942 Badrulmoluk Bamdad founded 'Jamiyat Zanan Iran' and started the publication *Zan Imruze*. The other major new organization was a women's party established through the initiative of Safiyeh Firuz, a long standing committed women activist. The expressed goal of this organization was to promote women's legal and social status and actively participate in consciousness raising on the issues of women. Fatemeh Sayyah, a prominent intellectual and writer on women's concerns became the party's secretary. The party and Dr. Sayyah

17. Iranian women were less able to establish links with other women's organizations than women of Arabic-speaking elites, who networked in Istanbul, the Arab capitals, and in Europe. Many of the elite women in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were of Turkish origin, and often spoke European languages as well (Badran 1995).

were vocal on the issues of suffrage and lobbied parliament to raise the issue in the Majlis (Golbon 1975). Democratization of family and marriage and divorce laws, which the party viewed as the foundation, remained the major issue around which much of the writing, lobbying and consciousness raising activities was focused. The party was later transformed into a council to allow women with different views to collaborate on common causes (Paidar 1995: 126-128, Woodsmall 1960: 80-83).

Many other political organizations had a women's wing. The most radical of these being the women's organization of the Tudeh, the Iranian Communist Party; the women's section worked under the leadership of the party, despite this lack of autonomy however, their writings and gender demands had a considerable impact on other women's organizations. In 1944, the Tudeh Party prepared a resolution asking for the enfranchisement of women, but it was defeated in the Majlis.

As the state gradually gained more control, particularly after the defeat in 1952 of the nationalist prime minister - who insisted on respecting the constitutional democracy - in addition to censorship and pressure tactics the regime began to co-opt and control the various women's organizations. The Shah's sister Princess Ashraf and a few of her allies initiated the High Council of Iranian Women's Organizations and, with the complete support of the state, they attempted to bring all women's organizations under their umbrella. Within a few years, they had effectively completed the task; this meant the loss of independence for the movement and a tacit agreement that the only demands put forward would be those the state was willing to grant.¹⁸

Despite these organizational developments, no major legal or social changes took place between 1936 (the year of de-veiling) and 1963 when Iranian women's enfranchisement was approved in a national referendum along with land reform and several other major policies as part of the White Revolution.¹⁹ Enfranchisement occurred almost

18. Given the nature of the state and its desire for control, those organizations that did not join became ineffective and most were dismantled.

19. The wide ranging reforms in Iran and other developing countries were encouraged by the United State's foreign policy as a means of preventing the growth of

30 years after the recognition of Turkish women's right to vote and participate in parliamentary politics, yet it met with considerable opposition from the Iranian clergy, including Ayatollah Khomeini himself, who viewed this as the complete corruption of Muslim mores. The opposition of the clergy, the bazaar merchants, and some landlords to the reform package led to a brief and unsuccessful uprising which resulted in the exile of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iraq.²⁰

The enfranchisement of women gave the necessary boost to the High Council of Iranian Women which renamed itself the Women's Organization of Iran; adopting an elaborate constitution, it attempted to establish branches in all provinces.²¹ This not only officially indicated the end of independent women's organizations but also set in motion the depoliticization of women's issues.²² Other democratic forces dropped women's questions from their lists of concerns. As the regime lost legitimacy with the public, all institutions and issues closely tied to the state (and in particular to members of the Shah's family) lost credibility regardless of their political intent.

However, the depoliticization of women's issues did not mean inactivity. The Women's Organization of Iran initiated programs and services aimed at women, such as family welfare centres, literacy classes, legal counselling, and professional training. Their greatest contribution however was their effective and successful lobbying for the Family Protection Law. This law, passed in 1967 and amended in 1975, sought to restrain men's right to polygamous marriage by requiring either the court's permission or the first wife's consent.

communism in the 1960s. For a discussion of the White Revolution, see Halliday 1978.

20. The extreme opposition of the clergy to the reforms package was mostly against land reform, as the religious establishment controlled the vast proportion of arable land in Iran. However, the clergy tried to mobilize a wider opposition by focusing on women's enfranchisement.

21. In fact by 1977 the organization had some 400 branches and its membership was up to 70,000 women.

22. For a brief discussion of the depoliticization of women's issues see Tohidi (1990) "The Intellectuals and the Gender Debates Over the Past Decades," [Farsi] and for a summary version see Tohidi (1996).

Divorces, except with mutual consent, had to be referred to the court. Child custody was also to be decided by the court on the principle of the child's best interest, which generally improved women's chances of retaining custody or at least visiting rights. However, despite the fact many other Muslim countries had adopted similar reforms, these modest reforms created another wave of opposition among the conservative clergy. Ayatollah Khomeini, then in exile in Iraq, announced that women whose divorces had been decreed by the court against their husbands' will would be committing adultery if they remarried (Mir-Hosseini 1996). Such hostility may have been engendered more by the exclusion of clergy from the political and legal power structure than by the content of the law.

In effect the Shah's regime, which thanks to oil money had become increasingly independent from the nation, was not interested in allowing even a minimal share of power or independent initiatives. For instance the appointed Senator Manochehrian, who was among the more vocal women since the 1950's, criticized the passport law which required women to obtain their husband's permission for each trip abroad and demanded that this discriminatory law be revised.²³ Her request was turned down without any justification. As a consequence of the heated debates over this issue in the senate, she resigned (Paider 1995). The only reason appeared to be that her initiative had not come through the acceptable channels, namely the Shah's family. Some six years later the passport law was slightly revised whereby the husband's permission was only required at the time of issue and not for each trip.

In practice these reforms primarily benefitted only women who had access to information as well as the social and economic support necessary to take advantage of the legal system. Yet, it would be a mistake to belittle the considerable ideological, symbolic, social and psychological significance of these reforms, which indicated to

23. In an private exchange M. Afkhami, the then director of Iran's Women Organization, explained that in fact such a demand was not her sole initiative, rather the demand was discussed among many of those interested in the legal position of women and followed several meetings with Manucsehrian. It was decided that she bring up the issue in the Senate house.

women and to society at large that women deserved more rights than tradition had accorded them. This had a substantial impact on women's self-perception. As will be discussed in the following sections, the hasty cancellation of these reforms by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 has come to represent a major liability for the regime and over the years, step by step, the Islamic Republic has had to reinstate these reforms (Kar and Hoodfar 1996; Paidar 1995).

Other significant changes that affected the self-perception of women and the definition of women's role resulted from their integration in the labour market. Although initially the ministry of education was the primary employer of women as teachers, gradually and especially after 1963 the government followed a policy of integrating women into the public sector. This was facilitated by the increasing number of women graduating from high school and university. The increased presence of women in the public sector also led to the formation of women's professional associations, many of which, particularly the associations of lawyers and teachers, have remained very active despite political vagaries. At least theoretically, the labour law guaranteed equal treatment for men and women, and entitled women to paid maternity leave. During the 1970s, large companies and ministries were required to provide day-care centres in order to facilitate women's employment. Nonetheless, according to official statistics (which by definition exclude women engaged in the informal economy), by 1978 women comprised only 8 percent of the total paid labour force (Moghadam 1993).

Women and the Revolution

The oil revenue which fuelled the economy and financed state projects made the government independent of its constituency and facilitated the erosion of the already limited political democracy in Iran. Thus while Iran had one of the world's fastest growing economies, large segments of the nation, including the middle classes which had experienced substantial economic improvement, grew increasingly alienated from the dictatorial regime which had officially installed a one-party system (Halliday 1978, Abrahamiam 1984). This process culminated in the most massive revolution in modern history.

In a spontaneous alliance, hundreds of thousands of Iranians of all social strata poured into the streets in every major city and demanded democracy. As more and more demonstrators were killed by the security forces, the Shah himself lost legitimacy, and the population began to demand that he step down. He responded with charges that the demonstrations were incited by foreign agitators and immoral communists. To refute these claims, demonstrators adopted religious symbols, including the veil, which simultaneously refuted any western or communist influence. This move facilitated the ascendance of the religious leaders, long enemies of the Shah, to the leadership of the anti-Shah movements. In effect, the Shi'i clergy, who had ready access to autonomous funding and an effective communication network through thousands of mosques, were the only organized opposition left in Iran with the ability and the legitimacy to galvanize the public. Finally, in early 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini emerged from exile as Iran's supreme religious and political leader.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Iranian revolution was the massive participation of women in the daily demonstrations. To many women who belonged to the non-veiled middle classes, the adoption of the veil was a temporary action that symbolized their rejection of the state's (read the Shah's) gender ideology (Yeganeh 1982, Betteridge 1983). As religious slogans, and especially the veil, were adopted by the movement, more and more women (particularly from more traditional segments of society) joined the demonstrations. This unconventional presence of women in political demonstrations, wearing traditional black *chador*, became the symbol of the popular revolution. However women's demands generally echoed those of the movement and were not specific gender demands.

Women's issues were not raised in the demonstrations because the Shah's regime had been inextricably linked to women's rights. Therefore, raising gender issues appeared to contradict the very aim of the anti-Shah movement. Women political activists refused to mobilize and organize on the question of women's rights. When many who were ambivalent about the revolution cautioned women that religious leaders (including Ayatollah Khomeini) had historically

been against women's equity and rights, others accused them of being divisive and trying to damage the unity of the political oppositional forces. Responding to these sentiments, Ayatollah Khomeini issued statements that the Islamic regime would restore dignity and real social worth to women. He emphasized that Islam has never been against women's freedom (Nobari 1978). Shrewdly these statements were cast in general terms, and women were left to interpret them according to their own understandings.

The Islamic Republic and the Question of Women

Within two weeks of coming to power, Ayatollah Khomeini in an attempt to reassert the clergy's success over the Pahlavi modernist ideology annulled the Family Protection Law. Temporary marriage, which had been outlawed although it continued to be practised among more traditional social groups, was not only legally sanctioned but was openly encouraged.²⁴ The most dramatic change, however, was lowering the legal age of maturity to 9 for girls and to 14 for boys, and enshrining this in the constitution. This was interpreted to mean that girls could be given in marriage at the age of nine, the legal age at which they are punishable as adults for any criminal offense (Kar and Hoodfar 1996).²⁵

Within a month of his return to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that women were barred from becoming judges in accordance with Islamic tradition. Three days after this announcement, Khomeini declared that women should wear the *hijab* at their place of work. Shortly after, the beaches were segregated. This was followed by the segregation of all sports events. This unexpected turn of events

24. For a discussion of temporary marriage in Iran, see Haeri (1987).

25. The age of marriage for girls had been increased to 16, and in 1976, to 18. In the early stages of the revolution, however, as a gesture of compromise to the religious leaders, the Shah's government lowered the age of marriage to 16 again. While many women and men opposed Ayatollah Khomeini's move for further reduction of marriage age, criticisms were dismissed until some years later when newspapers and magazines began to publish reports of the negative consequences of child marriages. It was only at this point that the age of marriage was defined as puberty, which in Iran is understood to be 13. However nine remained the age of majority for girls.

resulted in spontaneous demonstrations which continued for several weeks. Moreover these developments brought into focus a small gathering organized for March 8, International Women's Day, by a small group of women with leftist tendencies. This event, which normally would go unnoticed, grew into a protest rally, as thousands demonstrated against the undemocratic imposition of these codes.²⁶ Women lawyers, backed by secular as well as some Islamist forces, organized several sit-ins in the ministry of justice (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982). Despite a boycott of protest rallies by the media, including the national radio and television, the demonstrations attracted public attention and support. They also attracted mobs of religious zealots and paramilitary forces, mostly men but also women, armed with knives, broken glass, bricks, and stones.²⁷ The counter-protestors attacked and injured many women, while the Revolutionary Guard, then serving as the regime's police force, watched passively.

Surprised by the spontaneous protests, the government announced that the messages of Ayatollah Khomeini had been misunderstood, and that there were no plans to impose the *hijab*. They stated that while the government and the religious leaders were proponents of the veil, and hoped all Iranian women would adopt the *hijab*, they would not make it compulsory. Similarly, statements indicated that the Family Protection Law would remain in use until a new law was drafted. These announcements, which indicated that the government had responded to public pressure, encouraged some democrats (particularly socialists) to withhold their support for a protest rally planned for March 11. The democratic groups claimed that a rally at this stage of the revolution would be divisive, benefitting only

26. This day had been celebrated by the Tudeh party (the Iranian communist party) since the 1950s. However, it is only since the developments during the first few years of the revolution that has it been widely recognized as women's day by secular group.

27. Years later, it is now clear that the attacks were not spontaneous individual acts but were organized by Ghafary, who remained a high ranking member of the Islamic Republic Party, with the tacit support of many religious leaders (Bakhtiari 1996). The Revolutionary Guards, whose top commanders were also members of the IRP, had orders to remain passive in the face of attacks on demonstrators, if not to actually join forces with the attackers.

imperialists who wished to see the revolution defeated (Yeganeh 1982, Sansarian 1982). In short, women were told they should sacrifice their democratic and equal rights for the success of a revolution that had chosen them as the first victims of an anti-democratic agenda. Nonetheless, the media estimated that 20,000 women participated in that protest rally, and many more joined the march which followed it (Paidar 1995).

Public resistance and protest rallies did not change the minds of the religious hardliners determined to build an Islamic society, which they believed would not be possible without an "Islamic" family and the imposition of the *hijab* on women. Rather, the protests indicated to the government that they would have to adopt a gradual policy, meanwhile establishing much tighter control over oppositional street demonstrations. Thus, by June 1980 — only 15 months after the regime's own statements to the contrary — Ayatollah Khomeini declared that women must wear the *hijab* at their workplaces and many women who resisted were promptly dismissed. By 1981, *hijab* had become compulsory not just for Iranian Muslim women but also for members of Iran's religious minorities and foreign female visitors in all public spaces. Despite resistance grounded in the criticism that the dress code trespasses women's basic human rights, the law continues to be harshly imposed.

In an attempt to send women back to their homes where many conservatives believed they belonged, workplace day-care facilities were closed. Compensation packages were introduced which encouraged women to retire after only fifteen years of work, or transfer their full salaries to their husband and resign or work part-time only.²⁸ Ostensibly, these programs would ease women's lives and make it possible for them to attend to their domestic and motherhood responsibilities. Despite the recent relaxation in rapid Islamization policies which had aimed to reform society mostly at the cost of women, as recently as 1992 the government introduced a bill allowing women to retire after twenty years of work. The government has reasoned that the bill compensates women's double day of

28. See Moghadam 1993 for a more detailed discussion of the subject.

household and labour market work, which together mean that twenty years of work outside the home are equivalent to forty actual years of labour; early retirement would also enable women to attend to their domestic responsibilities. However, after twenty years in the labour force, most women are no longer in the family building cycle and their children are grown up. Changes such as unpaid leave and the right to work in locations close to their homes (both advantages enjoyed by Egyptian women), which would benefit young employed women experiencing the pressures of raising young children and managing a new household, have not been introduced. The underlying purpose of the policy is clear: to reduce male unemployment by removing women from the labour market and offering the vacant positions to men. Consequently, as women Islamist activists have noted critically, women's public sector employment is reduced by 2 percent each year.²⁹

Attempts to rebuild independent women's organizations

Within weeks of the revolution's success, many secular women realized the price of not having their own independent organizations and scrambled to organize themselves. Hundreds of small organizations were formed to better equip women to deal with the political crisis and put forward their long term demands. As well, women tried to organize themselves around their professional associations. Some of the organizations, supported by experienced and educated members, became vocal critics of the provisional government. Others attempted to reach grassroots women and build awareness, initiating training and literacy classes. Meanwhile, attempts in 1979 and 1980 to form the Women's Solidarity Committee, a coalition of women's organizations intended to coordinate women's responses on gender issues, were unfruitful. One reason for the failure to establish the coalition was that most of the participants were also active in other political organizations with divergent views, preventing them from appearing publicly on the same political platform even if the issues were gender related.

29. Mrs. Behrozy, a member of the parliament, has openly criticized Iran's patriarchal culture which prevents women's full participation in the labour market (*Zan-e Ruz* No.1304, 1991). See also Moghadam 1993.

This burst of organized feminist activity, however, was short-lived. The Islamic government used the Iran-Iraq war and threats of infiltration by pro-Shah forces as opportunities to crush organized political groups. Women's organizations were high on their agenda, and many of their active members were arrested and jailed. Others, faced with this repressive situation, went into exile where many continued to write and be active on the question of women. Many women activists who remained in the country re-emerged by the mid and late 1980s, forming small, informal consciousness-raising or training groups, while others continued to write. However, to this day it has not been possible for secular women to organize public forums and express their views on gender issues.

The birth of the Islamist women's movement

Nineteen seventy-nine also witnessed the birth of an Islamist feminist movement in Iran incorporating several groups and individuals. The most influential of these groups, the Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (WSIR), formed very shortly after the revolution. The objectives of this organization were to develop culturally appropriate ways of building a society that would end women's oppression. WSIR incorporated highly educated women, including many PhD graduates of American and European universities, as well as others whose political activism, opposition to the Shah, and religious tendencies gave them considerable legitimacy. The presence of prominent women (such as Azam Talaghani) who had been political activists and were well versed in religious education, and who had family links to the religious/political leaders, initially facilitated their access to media.³⁰ In the views of WSIR and other similar women's circles, the West had turned women into sexual objects. The Socialist East, by focusing only on the economic integration of women and overlooking women's considerable contribution to society through their reproductive roles, also failed to truly liberate women and make them equal counterparts of men (Hashemi 1982).

30. Talaghani's father, Ayatollah Talaghani, represented the more democratic wing of the political clergy. Many other women in the group had similar familial connections.

Islamist women were also critical of women's treatment by historical and modern Islamic societies. In their views, through distortion and manipulation, and by exaggerating some aspects of Qur'anic verses and downplaying others, Muslim societies have oppressed women for centuries and denied them their genuine Islamic rights and dignity. Far from romanticizing a "glorious past," the Islamist women advocates targeted many unfair aspects of traditional and conventional religious beliefs and practices, demolishing the popular conception of a long-ago just Islamic society, which was being promoted as a model for Islamic Iran. The pages of *Zan-e Ruz* and other women's magazines contained many criticisms, but also fresh glimpses of the role and status of women in the "ideal Islamic society" which is yet to be created. Islamist feminists established branches in provincial towns and engaged themselves in consciousness-raising and the promotion of their own Islamic visions on gender.³¹

Islamist women expected not only that the new government would work with them, providing financial support and making it possible for them to continue with their mission, but also that they would be invited by the government to participate in policy making and consult on gender issues. However to their disillusionment, none of these expectations materialized. Despite their own approval of *hijab* they criticized government moves to make *hijab* compulsory. They issued an open letter, warning the government of the consequences of reducing Islamic society to *hijab* and placing undue importance on it. They stated that in an Islamic society, both men and women should dress modestly and avoid seduction, and thus the dress code should address both genders and not just women (Hashemi 1982; Talaghani, Tabatabai et al 1982). Islamist women also criticized the cancellation of the Family Protection Law and the return to laws which were even more unjust and un-Islamic.

Open criticisms such as these, even though always combined with reiterations of support for the revolution and for Ayatollah Khomeini, put Islamist women activists in disfavour with the hardline conservatives (firmly consolidated in the Islamic Republican Party),

31. For early reports of this trend see Yeganeh and Tabari 1982.

who saw women's place as in the home not the public arena, and certainly not in the position of deciding what Islamic society should be like. Thus, with the tacit support of Islamic Republic Party leaders, Women's Society of the Islamic Republic meetings and property became targets of attacks by Hezbollah (the mob supporter of the Islamic Republican Party primarily under the leadership of Ghafary, a dogmatic religious hardliner). With a considerable degree of success, the Islamic Republican Party also managed to replace outspoken Islamist women on the *Zan-e Ruz* editorial board with their own supporters. Another popular radical Islamist women's magazine, *Rah-e Zeinab* (which like *Zan-Ruz* existed before the revolution but was renamed), was forced to fold. While the hardliners who pushed for rapid Islamization continued to organize women's demonstrations in support of their policies, they found the idea of an independent Islamic women's organization not palatable at all.

In this political climate, the first wave of organized feminist Islamist activities diminished. Azam Talaghani was the only member of this group who continued to hold a prominent political position for the first few years, since she had been elected to the first parliament. After her term in office, she continued to run the Women's Islamic Institute as a semi-charitable organization as well as a women's training centre, and has produced frequent publications. The institution has managed to continue operating and still releases occasional publications, despite periodic harassment from the hardliners and more recently from liberal forces within the government.³² Nonetheless, she has succeeded in safeguarding the independence of the institute, the first independent women's NGO to participate in regional and international women's issues events.³³

32. Talaghani has been forced to move from the building that had been allocated to her in the early years of revolution. She has also been harassed by legal charges which have subsequently been dropped. Although she attends major international meetings, she is often accompanied by a government delegate, which in my interpretation is intended to limit her freedom to speak out.

33. In Iran, people talk of "government NGOs" which means they receive substantial support from the government and basically are to support government agenda, as well as "non-government NGOs" whose freedom and activities are routinely curtailed by the government.

Working from within

Faced with the unpleasant reality of government reluctance to support its own program of promoting justice for women, Islamist women activists had to find alternative channels. They adopted more surreptitious and individualistic strategies, arousing less suspicion from hardliners. Many of the ideologues continued to write for women's magazines in a milder and more acceptable tone, nonetheless revealing the contradiction of trying to build a just Islamic society primarily through exposing women to unjust hardship, both within the family and society in the name of Islam. Thus they continued to raise awareness.³⁴ This strategy has been so successful that a new magazine, *Khanevadeh* (Family), has been launched primarily to feature family problems. As the magazine has never claimed to be a woman's magazine, it is read by both men and women, it has become primarily a forum for women to gain support for complaints and legal problems concerning marriage, divorce, custody of their children, and more recently, domestic violence which is often justified in the name of Islam. Most stories are printed with little or no commentary, making it difficult for opponents to brand the magazine as "political." This magazine, now in its fourth year, has proved to be very popular, even among those normally less sympathetic to women's cause. Its current topics are frequently the subject of women's discussions and even local religious leaders feel obliged to address some of the issues or specific cases in their sermons.

Other Islamist women, many of whom were well versed in religious matters, continued to present a new gender vision based on a woman-centred interpretation of Islamic text.³⁵ They pointed out that much of what is being presented to women as Islamic and "authentic Islamic ways" is nothing but "patriarchy in Islamic costume." These

34. See for instance articles on women's public rights and family code published in *Zan-e Ruz* particularly between 1981 and 1985 but also in subsequent years.

35. Beside books, women's magazines such as *zanan* (women), *hoghogh-e-zanan* (Women's Rights), *hajar*, and numerous other newspapers are the platform from where Islamist women disseminate and popularize their views of Islam particularly as it relates to women.

efforts have proved very effective. Within a few years, as Islamization affected more and more women, critical voices issued from all segments of society, including conservative women. Many conservative women, now in positions of influence and access to prominent women's magazines, began to search for an acceptable Islamic vision that would provide answers to women's demands. Thus many feminist Islamist views and woman-centred interpretations of Islamic texts found their way into conservative circles, facilitating legal change, as I will examine later.

Simultaneously, other processes encouraged conservatives to be more hospitable toward more radical Islamic gender visions. As earlier secular and feminist writers had forewarned, many of the women's complaints and hardships were caused by the introduction of new gender-discriminatory laws in the process of society's Islamization. This reality has given the secular forces renewed legitimacy in the eyes of the public, who increasingly grow leery of what is meant by "Islamic justice," at least for women. The revolution, with promises of justice for women hitherto the most oppressed segment of Iranian society, and the invitations from Islamic leaders to ordinary women to participate in street demonstrations and show support for the regime and its policies, politicized women (and continues to do so), giving them a new confidence. While they were willing to be patient with the new regime's claims that fundamental change demands time, as women's situation deteriorated year after year, they started to ask questions, sending flurries of protest letters to the leaders, national newspapers, and women's magazines. Given the abysmal performance of the economy and the burdens imposed on the population by long years of the Iran-Iraq war, the government was wary of public criticism and further alienation of their constituencies. In this atmosphere, the shrewd religious and political leaders grew more amenable to compromise on gender issues.

Pressure to adopt a more reconciliatory tone on gender issues also came from the international community. Iranian oppositional forces and feminists in exile have seen their role as exposing the extent to which women's basic human rights are negated each day in Iran. They make full use of their access to international media and take

advantage of the apprehension of European and North American societies toward the Iranian regime. The official promotion of a gender-apartheid society by a movement that has claimed to represent the oppressed, especially with compulsory veiling, and stories of stoning of women and the like, offer tempting headlines to the European and North American media. Concurrently, the Iranian regime has grown more astute and experienced, recently realizing the political and economic value of international acceptance. Pressure from its critics on human rights issues made it hard for the regime to reintegrate itself internationally. Thus, slowly the regime became engaged in improving its tarnished image abroad, and gender issues became high on the new agenda. For feminist activists - and particularly Islamist women - this created fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of legal reform.

Logistical and strategic moves

Political change in Iran brought a fundamental change in the way women activists viewed reforms, and new strategies for achieving desired social and legal changes. After the revolution, seeing that the stroke of a pen abrogated many laws which benefited them, women became convinced that real change had to take place at the societal level, or at the very least in women's consciousness. Moreover, it was clear that the law-making bodies were dominated by conservative men for whom biology and *shariah* determined the fate of women; in their view, criticism of conventional Islamic practices was a heresy which stemmed from westernization. Clearly, lobbying influential leaders, a primary strategy for pushing reforms before the revolution, would not be effective in post-revolution Iran.

An overview of the discussion around gender issues and the position of women makes it clear that women activists have been bypassing the government and law-making bodies by taking their issues directly to the public through print media, women's religious gatherings, and sometimes via radio and television. They expose injustices suffered by women in the name of creating a "just" Islamic society, and invite the public to be the judge. The language used is often simple, marked by everyday religious concepts and metaphors, and usually in the

context of real life stories. The discourse appears "personal" with no apparent political tendency or agenda, and thus escapes censorship. In this way women's complaints are introduced into public conversations, galvanizing support and sympathy, sometimes to the extent that religious/political leaders feel obliged to engage in the debates. Women activists, particularly those with influential connections, ensure that the views of sympathetic religious leaders and politicians also gain publicity. For instance, activists have invited more liberal religious leaders to grant interviews to women's magazines or other media, and urged them to discuss popular issues in their sermons. It is important to recognize that these efforts are not formally organized or centralized, but emerge from groups of individuals who are for the most part engaged in fragmentary activities.

For the sake of further clarification, I review a few examples. During the early 1980s, women's magazines, including those sponsored by the government, published many stories of poor young women who had been given in temporary marriage and became pregnant. After the expiration of their marriages, they were unable to find their infants' fathers, who disappeared in the huge cities.³⁶ Magazines also documented the lives of women who were married very young, struggled against poverty, and through hard work and penny-pinching eventually improved their material condition until, middle aged, they were divorced without financial compensation or alimony because their husbands wanted to marry younger women. Many similar stories documented the unfair treatment of women. Magazines and newspapers printed open letters to the religious leaders asking if this was the way to achieve Islamic justice. "How can the religious leaders and our legal system leave the fate of women in the hands of men who are obviously not good and fair Muslims?", they asked. Religious leaders were asked to explain how the regime intended to restore the respect Islam and the Islamic Republic had promised women.

36. Temporary marriages, practised among Shi'i Muslims, are contracted for a fixed period of time. For more discussion on the topic see Haeri 1987.

Another campaign targeted the custody of children after the death of their fathers, often as martyrs of the revolution or the Iran-Iraq war. According to the conventional practice based on *sharia*, the paternal grandfather or another close paternal male relative (and not the mother) receives custody and guardianship of children whose father has died. Thus many women who had lost their husbands in the war also lost their children to their in-laws, eager to gain custody of the children of martyrs, who receive government compensation. These widows, who were among the supporters of the regime and whose husbands had volunteered to go to the war, wrote and gave public talks about their experiences, as widows of the martyrs they had considerable legitimacy and leeway in expressing their opinions. They spoke about having given their beloved husbands to the revolution and for Islam, to be rewarded by having their children, their flesh and blood, torn from their bosoms in the name of Islam. "How can that be just and fair?" they asked. "How can a fair system justify that a woman be so tortured and punished for her wholehearted support of the revolution? Is this what we were promised by Islamic justice?"³⁷ These stories received considerable sympathy from government supporters as well as critics, and forced the regime to react.

Major Achievements

The first manifestation of the success of the campaign was indicated by Ayatollah Khomeini's introduction of a new Family Law. Although this law did not go as far as many Muslim women activists had hoped and leaves much to be desired, it was nevertheless in many respects, one of the more advanced marriage laws in the Middle East (outside Turkey and Tunisia), yet it did not deviate from conventional assumptions of "Islamic" law. Under this new law an official marriage contract stipulates conditions which put women in a stronger legal position within marriage. As Muslim marriage is a contractual relationship, Muslim women and men have always had the

37. Several women active in demanding reform of custody laws were interviewed as part of the Women and Law Research Program, carried out by the author under the auspices of Women Living Under Muslim Laws Network.

opportunity to insert conditions in the marriage agreement, although people rarely did.³⁸ This standard contract removes much of the burden on individual brides (and their families) trying to secure a fairer marriage deal for themselves without appearing that they doubt the good faith of the suiters. Instead, the burden is shifted to the groom who must negotiate to remove the clauses he disagrees with, giving the bride's party leverage to request additional conditions of their own. This official format also provides some protection for those given in marriage too young to be able to effectively negotiate more equitable marriage conditions for themselves. Notwithstanding, the nature of partnership between husbands and wives remains fundamentally unequal.

This success was followed by a decree from Ayatollah Khomeini granting martyrs' widows custody of their children even after remarriage.³⁹ While this law does not extend to all women, its significance stems from breaking with the Shi'i belief that custody laws are Qur'anic and not subject to challenge. Thus it opens the door for further change, especially since the stature of Ayatollah Khomeini prevents accusations that the law conflicts with Islamic jurisprudence. Similarly, in the area of divorce rights, several amendments have improved women's legal rights (Kar and Hoodfar 1996, Mir-Hosseini 1996).

Women continue to agitate for more fundamental changes by asserting that Islamic texts and traditions may be reinterpreted and then enacted into law. For instance, Iranian women campaigned for the *ojrat ol-mesal* (wages for housework) law which was passed in December 1991. Islamist women activists argued that women, like all other Muslims, are entitled to the fruit of their labour on the grounds that Islam is against exploitation, but that for centuries women have been denied this basic right. They pointed out that in Islamic tradition wives have no duties to their husbands beyond being faithful, and are not required to work in

38. For more discussion of marriage contract of Islamic marriage contract see proceeding of Islamic marriage contract, Islamic Legal studies program, Harvard Law school, January 29-31, 1999.

39. For more discussion see Kar and Hoodfar 1996.

their husbands' homes, to the extent that women are not even obliged to breastfeed their children without payment from their husbands. Therefore, since all women do in fact work in their husbands' homes, they are entitled to the fruit of their labour. The argument, though novel and unconventional, was based on Islamic texts supported by Qur'anic verses. The bill was initially resisted by the Islamic parliament and conservative religious leaders because it was an unconventional interpretation of "Islamic law." However, as the conservatives could not prove that it was un-Islamic, it gathered considerable popular support, and the law was eventually passed in December 1992. Presently, a man who intends to divorce his wife without proving fault on her part must first pay housework wages for the duration of the marriage. Many women feel that, despite its problematic application, this law has provided a better bargaining position than ever before (Mir-Hosseini 1996, Kar and Hoodfar 1996). Nonetheless to most women, it is the symbolic and ideological value of this law that is significant. It stresses to society and to women themselves that their labour should not be taken for granted. More importantly, it demonstrates that there are many possible and unconventional interpretations of Islamic texts that have not yet been explored.

A further aspect of legal gender discrimination which has been subject to strong criticism by both secular and Islamist gender activists and by the international community has been the prevention of women from becoming judges. At one end of the spectrum the secularists claim that this state of affairs is glaring indication that "Islam" and Muslim laws are discriminatory towards women. At the other end the Islamists claim that this is the result of centuries of misreading and of patriarchal interpretation of the spirit of Islam. This situation, together with the unfair treatment of women in the justice system, particularly in the family court, brought enough pressure on the government and the structurally independent judiciary that a system was introduced whereby women could act as counsel to male judges in family court. While this compromise was welcomed, it did not satisfy critics who continued to lobby for the removal of those obstacles which prevented women from becoming judges. Finally, in 1997 after much debate and discussion it was announced that women could be employed as judges. While this was nationally and

internationally celebrated as yet further achievement for women in Iran, Iranian activists are concerned that women still cannot become full-fledged judges with the power to issue final judgments (Kar 1998). While activists view the change as a victory, they continue their struggles to rectify the law and remove all legal and social obstacles for women to become full-fledged judges.

Criticism of government performance from women activists also resulted in the establishment of the Bureau of Women's Affairs (BWA), which reports directly to the president. This office coordinates the development of government policies and programs and is charged with improving the status of women. Thus the Bureau has established offices in many of the critical ministries such as justice and labour, in order to examine women's issues. The Women's Social and Cultural Council, established in 1988 and closely affiliated with the Higher Council of Cultural Revolution, has also assumed much more prominence. Although members of these governmental organizations are appointed by the government, they have emerged nonetheless as forums for women's complaints as well as successful lobbying groups. In the past, the Council has used its visibility to draw attention to women's concerns and gender discrimination.

Parliamentary Participation

While Ayatollah Khomeini disagreed with women's formal political participation in 1963, once in power he did not question women's enfranchisement. The massive participation of women in the revolution demonstrated the potential political force of women to religious leaders. While the previous regime and other political groups had for the most part overlooked women, the Islamic regime and the political clergy successfully incorporated massive numbers of ordinary women as their primary constituency. Thus, in practical terms, the Council of Guardians, which oversees elections and the Parliament, would have to accept the nomination of at least some women candidates. While the number of women members of parliament has declined substantially since the revolution (see table 1), women have been elected to all four parliaments.⁴⁰ Given

40. Also see Asfandiari 1994.

recent political developments and the election of a more liberal president in May 1997, it is generally expected that in the next parliamentary election the number of women MPs will sharply increase, as is indicated by the by-elections which sent more women members to parliament. Although many women members have declared that they represented men as well as women, the lack of interest from male members in women's concerns and the attention from women electors who write to and approach them with their problems have encouraged women members of parliament to devote more attention to women's issues.

Table 1. *Women Members of Parliament Before and After the Islamic Revolution*

Parliament	Elected from Tehran	Elected from other provinces	As percentage of all MPs
<i>1963: women gain electoral rights</i>			
1963-1967	3	4	3.5 percent
1963-1971	3	7	3.5 percent
1971-1976	3	14	6.5 percent
1976-1979	3	15	7.0 percent
<i>1979: establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran</i>			
1979-1983	4	0	1.5 percent
1983-1987	4	0	1.5 percent
1987-1992	4	0	1.5 percent
1992-1996	5	4	3.3 percent
*1996-	6	4	3.7 percent

*Since 1996 the number of women members of the parliament has increased to fourteen as a result of several by-elections.

The Council of Guardians, composed of six of the most conservative religious leaders and six hand-picked legal experts, oversees elections and the Parliament, and consequently secular and even more radical Islamist women have no chance of gaining approval for

their nominations. Thus candidates tend to have similar ideological tendencies. As Mehranguiz Kar (1997) has pointed out, just as under the Shah the regime affirmed only one type of woman — pro-monarchy and Eurocentric, now only pro-regime (and not even Islamist women of other tendencies) are allowed into the parliament. Nonetheless, as gender issues and the participation of women in public life have acquired a national profile, more women have pronounced their candidacy and more have been elected. In the last parliamentary election (March and April 1996), 179 women were announced as final candidates for some 84 districts, many of them in small and normally conservative towns. In several areas women had overwhelming support and were elected in the first round of voting, indicating they had more than fifty percent of the vote.⁴¹ However, in several cases where women had the greatest number of votes in their district (such as Mallayer and Isfahan), the Council of Guardians used flimsy excuses to annul the election results and prevented the women from taking their seats in the parliament.⁴²

Nonetheless women were elected, including for instance Faizah Rafsanjani, the daughter of the outgoing president and a staunch supporter of women's right to participate in sport, who was elected in the first round with close to one million votes. Separated by a very small margin, she is the most popular member after the speaker of parliament.⁴³ Moreover since then, through several by-elections more women have been elected to the parliament and by 1998 their numbers had increased to fourteen. Nonetheless, while women continue to participate in the male-dominated and conservative parliament, their lack of representation in ministerial and higher government echelons indicates that the regime's fundamental

41. Candidates must receive more than 50 percent of the vote in order to be elected; most MPs are elected only in the second round of voting.

42. Currently, there are many rumours and jokes circulating in Iran about the jolt that the Council of Guardians experienced in realizing that women have excelled over men, an impossibility in their view.

43. In fact, as the announcement of her election result was delayed without explanation, there were sturdy rumours that she had won the greatest number of votes and should therefore have been named as the speaker. The conservatives were not ready to name a woman speaker of the Islamic parliament.

conservative gender vision has not changed, but rather that it has been forced to make some compromises.

Clearly, despite the limited possibility of women formally organizing for change, they have reached a considerable level of political maturity and are using those channels open to them in an attempt to improve their social and legal status. The most significant indicator of such a political coming of age is their massive participation in the last presidential election in May 1997. Given that some 88% of total eligible voters participated in the election, even by most conservative estimates clearly some 40% of those who cast their vote were women. This level of women's political participation is a major achievement for any society but particularly for Iran where women's literacy rates, though improved, leave much to be desired (Mahran 1991; Higgins & Shoar-Ghaffari 1994). Iranian women played a decisive role in electing president Khatami, the most liberal candidate, and the least favoured by the clergy establishment.⁴⁴ He had expressed more receptive views on freedom of political expression and on gender issues and women's concerns. Although it was highly anticipated and expected that the president would name at least one woman minister, thus far this has not happened. He has appointed a woman as vice-president of the environment, the highest governmental position a woman has occupied since the revolution.

Conclusion

This overview of public discussions on the position of women indicates that, far from being marginal as orientalists continue to claim, it has been central to the debate surrounding the national goal of modernizing and building a strong independent nation in Iran. Defining the role and position of women has been an important

44. As it is ambiguous whether women can stand for presidential election or not, some eight women including Azam Talaghani, a long standing Islamist activist and a member of the first Islamic Republic Parliament, daughter of the late and much respected Ayatollah Talaghani, presented their candidacy. However their candidacy, like that of many of their male counterparts, was rejected by the Council of Guardians without specifying whether their rejection was based on their gender. What women did achieve through this strategy was considerable public discussion on the topic.

arena where political interests have sought to gain support for their views and demonstrate their control of the state power. In this process women's views and consensus are rarely taken into account. While the modernist Pahlavi regime (1925-1978) once in power embarked on de-veiling women and encouraging their public participation, the Islamist regime (1979) sees the "Islamization" of women's roles and their veiling as an integral part of the government's stability and ideological success. However women in both cases through their resistance and subversion have managed, at least partially, to assert themselves and force the state to make major concessions and revise their gender ideology.

Although women, to varying degrees, have participated in the nationalist movements since the end of 19th century, it was their massive participation in the anti-Shah movement that ended their political invisibility. Women in their black veils became the symbol of revolution. However, with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, once again, their roles within and without the family — as well as their clothing — became part of the state's self-definition. This time, however, opposition to the oppressive measures supposedly sanctified by Islam comes from Islamists as well as secularists and is voiced by women themselves.

The new wave of Islamist feminists, with their unconventional and women-centred interpretations of Islam, is challenging and reforming Islamic doctrine from within, rather than imposing or advocating a Western model of gender relations. Using the language of the religious/political leaders, they demand that the state live up to its promise of Islamic equality of men and women and do away with oppressive measures that for centuries have held Muslim women hostage and prevented Muslim societies from flourishing. The success of the Islamic revolution, they assert, is dependent upon its ability to break away from patriarchal practices and implement purely Islamic measures.

In the past decade and a half, debates and discussions on the social and legal position of women have been coloured by the sharp contrast between patriarchal and women-centred interpretations of women's rights in Islam. The image of a pragmatic feminism in

Islamic costume can perhaps best capture the gist of much of these debates. This irreversible shift has already changed women's consciousness and encouraged them to distinguish between patriarchal tradition and "Islam."⁴⁵

What deserves special note is that while Islamist women activists may appear to be diametrically opposed to secular feminists and derive part of their current political legitimacy from their critique of secular groups, in practical terms the two camps are close allies and their demands are generally analogous, as both groups strive to improve women's social and legal situation. However, their effectiveness in the political context of Iran depends on occupying opposing camps since as long as secular feminists make their voice heard, the Islamist women activists who articulate their demands within the "Islamic" perspective appear as an "authentic" movement and more acceptable to the political leaders of Islamic Republic.

45. It is important to note that such intellectual/political development was expressed early in the revolution by Islamist women activists. Since then, others like Abdol Karim Soroosh, a Muslim philosopher who initially supported the regime and its cultural/education revolution, have presented similar views in that they distinguish between Islam as a divine religion and its interpretation by human beings (for a summary discussion of this position see Vakili 1996).

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