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# Steering between Scylla and Charybdis: Shifting Gender Roles in Twentieth Century Iran

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## Introduction

Over the last decade a substantial literature has developed on the causes as well as the social and political consequences of the Iranian revolution of 1979, which replaced the modernist and authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy with the antimodernist and repressive theocracy of the Islamic Republic. Some studies have stressed the historical role of the Muslim Shiite ideology and its institutions in Iranian politics (Akhavi; Mottahedeh; Fischer; Amir Arjomand). Others have focused on the role of imperialist powers in Iran as well as on the class composition and ideology of radical groups that initiated social movements (Halliday; Keddie; Abrahamian; Parsa). Still others have pointed to the disruptive consequences of modernization during the Pahlavi era (Menashri). Regardless of their theoretical orientation, most commentaries on the 1979 revolution have agreed with feminist writers and social scientists that the revolution involved a significant shift in gender relations and that the government of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) followed an agenda that aimed at reversing many of the political and social gains of the Iranian women in the last century (Sanasarian; Azari; Tabari and Yeganeh; Moghadam; Moghissi; Yeganeh; Afkhami and Friedl).

But how was it possible for the antifeminist Islamic Republic to take roots in Iran despite nearly a century of support for greater women's rights in that country? Who are the men and women who endorsed the fundamentalist movement and embraced the so-called traditional values it advocates? Was the Iranian case a historical aberration, or are there lessons to be drawn for other predominantly Muslim developing countries?

A feminist historiography of twentieth-century Iran calls for the exploration of these and similar questions. We need to understand how gender issues came to influence Iranian politics since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, how women's bodies became the site of political struggles, and how the modernist Pahlavi government and the antimodernist theocracy of the Islamic Republic each constructed its own definitions of gender.

In this process traditional concepts of femininity were rejected, revised, redefined, or retained through competing political and religious discourses.<sup>1</sup> Modernization involved both social and political emancipa-

tion from some traditional gender roles. But modernization also instituted new disciplinary practices with respect to women's bodies, a process that began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated after women were unveiled in 1936. These new disciplinary practices were articulated by a multiplicity of powers, among them the secular and authoritarian government of Reza Shah and Muhammad Reza Shah, the religious anti-modernist establishment, the left-wing and nationalist political parties, and the women's organizations themselves.

By the turn of the century three distinct political discourses on gender relations had become prominent in Iran:

1. A secular and radical modernist discourse that called for the social, political, and cultural modernization of Iran and that considered certain changes in gender roles to be desirable factors of modernization and Westernization;
2. an antimodernist religious discourse that saw the emerging modernity and political democracy as threats to its very existence and that especially resented any changes in gender roles; and finally
3. a technocratic modernist discourse that accepted the new technological aspects of modernity in the areas of health, hygiene, and educational reform and that encouraged the construction of more modern women's bodies without wanting to alter traditional gender roles in any substantial way.

As women gained new rights in the first half of the twentieth century through education, employment, and unveiling, differences between "radical modernists" and "technocratic modernists" were gradually minimized. Such a convergence could take place because, in fact, neither group was concerned with women's individual rights, including sexual emancipation; nor could they come to terms with the extensive shift in gender relations that a feminist agenda implied. In the second half of the twentieth century, radical intellectuals who had been committed to modernist ideologies, including greater social, economic, and political rights for women, became disillusioned with Western democracy and feminism. At the same time the "antimodernist" religious discourse came to embrace technological and industrial modernization as well as a leftist anti-imperialist rhetoric. Ultimately the convergence of these multiple discourses on the problematic of modernity in a nationalist coalition made the 1979 revolution possible—with hostility toward feminism forming one of the main pillars of the new alliance.

## **The Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906: Radical Democracy and the Conservative Clerics**

The first decade of the twentieth century was an important turning point in the lives of urban middle-class Iranian women. The Iranian

Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which was influenced by the 1905 revolution in neighboring Russia, began with the political protests of groups of dissident intellectuals, members of the ulama (clerics), merchants, artisans, workers, and some women of Tehran. By August 1906 the opposition had wrestled from Muzaffar al-Din Shah the right to form a Majlis (parliament) and to draft a constitution along European lines.

Once the immediate goals of the revolution were achieved, a large number of anjumans (grassroots councils) were formed in cities and even in some large villages, calling for reform and social justice. In a period of three years a variety of women's societies, schools, health clinics, and adult education centers were formed in Tehran as well as in some other cities through the volunteer work and donations of upper- and middle-class women who came from progressive constitutionalist families. By April 1910, nearly fifty girls schools had opened in Tehran and a women's congress on education took place in the capital. Women's councils became involved in educational and political campaigns and raised funds for schools, hospitals, and orphanages (see Afary "The Debate").

The Constitutional Revolution was predominantly influenced by three modern ideologies: Western liberalism, the Babi movement (a dissident Shiite sect formed in the mid-nineteenth century), and social democracy. Social democracy had spread to Iran from Russia through migrant Iranian oil workers and merchants who worked in Transcaucasia. The Russian Social Democratic Workers Party had influenced the creation of the Iranian Organization of Social Democrats (Firqah-yi Ijtima'iyun 'Amiyun) in Baku. Branches of this organization were formed in many cities of Iran after the August 1906 revolution and helped radicalize the newly formed provincial and popular councils. While the new electoral laws of September 1906 expressly barred women from the electoral process, many progressive intellectuals of the Constitutional Revolution, Majlis delegates, journalists, and poets held secret social democratic beliefs and therefore were sympathetic to women's rights issues. The three most radical social democratic newspapers of this period—the Tiflis-based *Mulla Nasr al-Din* and the Tehran newspapers *Sur-i Israfil* and *Iran-i Naw*—spoke against traditions such as polygamy, the veil, and easy male divorce. However, most advocates of women's rights in Iran focused on women's education and the need for women's schools and associations (see Afary *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*).

The radicalization of the revolution angered some prominent Shiite clerics who now joined the royalist opposition and the landed nobility. Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, the most eminent cleric in Tehran, vehemently opposed the new girls' schools and women's associations. He warned that the emancipation of women would lead to their "prostitution" as well as to intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims, undermining the very foundations of an Islamic society in Iran. Although Nuri was unable

to stop the reform movement, he nevertheless succeeded in carrying out part of his agenda. Article two of the 1907 supplementary constitutional laws created a five-member council of clerics with veto power over the parliament. A number of religious restrictions were also placed on civil rights. Whether it was freedom of speech, of publication, or of organization, the new stipulations forbade language or action that was “offensive” to Islamic traditions. The council of clerics did not become active during the Constitutional Revolution, but the idea was revived later by Ayatollah Khomeini and become part of the constitution of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Alongside these two predominant tendencies of the turn of the century—that is, the secular-radical modernist discourses and the anti-modernist religious discourse—we also find the voices of technocratic modernists among both men and women who called for selective modernization on gender issues. Thus while some radical women and men were writing about polygamy and other abuses against women, the two women’s journals of this period, *Danish* (1910–11) and *Shikufah* (1913–17), avoided most issues of gender inequality, sexuality, and politics and instead chose to focus on health, hygiene, education, home economics, child care, and proper etiquette. They therefore assured the public that the new Iranian woman could enjoy the advantages of modernity without challenging many traditional gender roles or moving beyond the acceptable confines of propriety and moral decency.

The sudden end of the Constitutional Revolution in 1911 through Russian and British intervention did not extinguish the public’s desire to modernize and Westernize. Advocates of women’s rights continued to make important inroads. Women retained the right to form their own schools and associations, to publish newspapers, and to speak on behalf of their rights. In the decade that followed, liberal and radical supporters of women’s rights began to call for greater reforms in women’s education, employment, and political participation. Eventually the issue of unveiling, the first step toward the bodily emancipation of women, assumed center stage.

### **Emancipation from Above under the Impact of the Russian Revolution: Reza Shah and the Banning of the Veil**

Political and educational reforms with regard to women’s rights continued in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In 1921, the reformist military leader Reza Khan took power in Tehran and four years later established his full authority in the country as Reza Shah Pahlavi. With regard to gender politics, he is remembered for his support of women’s education and his decision in 1936 to ban the wearing of the veil

by Iranian women. What is often neglected in the discussion of Reza Shah's reforms is the international political context in which these reforms took place. The Russian Revolution of 1917, and especially the activities of the Bolshevik women's organization, the Zhenotdel, in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, had a profound impact on neighboring Turkey and Iran, where a variety of left-wing political parties and women's associations became active. The reforms of Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk) and later Reza Shah were meant to disarm the leftist forces ideologically and present the possibility of social reform through a secular and authoritarian government. For a while they succeeded.

The reforms of the Zhenotdel in Central Asia included provisions for secular marriage based on the mutual consent of the partners, the right to unilateral divorce by either party, the abolition of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children, legalized abortion, efforts to end polygamy, equal pay for equal work, and women's suffrage. Gradually female-initiated divorce increased; hundreds of Muslim women volunteered to be translators and assistants for the Zhenotdel; and many abandoned the veil. But the reaction of male Communist leaders in Central Asia was mixed. While some supported the activities of the Zhenotdel, others tried to sabotage the process, and still others tried to take sexual advantage of the newly unveiled women. Gang rape of these young women and attempts by Communist officials and others to turn them into prostitutes were reported in the documents of this period. As a result many of the women who had unveiled and left their families behind decided to take up the veil again. The years 1927–28 witnessed mass retaliation against Central Asian women who had unveiled. The Communist leadership accepted some of the demands of the conservative male community. Autonomous women's organizations were censured, because they "diverted" energy from the main cause, "recruited women regardless of class," held feminist sympathies, and were thus susceptible to Western influence, and finally the Zhenotdel was also closed down (Massell). These changes in the Muslim areas of the Soviet Union had a remarkable influence on modernist and authoritarian leaders in Turkey and Iran. The question of women's emancipation, which originally had the strong support of progressive radicals, was now gradually appropriated by the secular authoritarian state and presented as a vehicle for modernization and capitalist development (see Kandiyoti "Emancipated but Unliberated?").

The reign of Reza Shah (1925–41) established a unified authoritarian regime in the country. He crushed political opposition, dismantled labor unions and radical political organizations, and co-opted or silenced opposition in the parliament. In 1925, with backing from the Majlis and the support of the ulama, who preferred to see him as a new monarch rather than as the president of a republic (as was Ataturk), Reza Khan named himself the new shah and established the Pahlavi dynasty. He soon em-

barked on an ambitious program of modernization and centralization of power and gained popular support for his insistence on Iran's independence from the political interference of the Great Powers.

Reza Shah took a number of steps to reduce the power of the ulama in Iran, though he never went as far as Atatürk, who replaced shariat laws with a revised version of the Swiss Civil Code, changed family laws, and forbade religious education in schools. Shariat religious studies and the teaching of Arabic, the language of the Koran, were reduced in Iranian schools. A more secular legal code replaced the dominance of the shariat court in all matters except family laws. All legal transactions with the exception of marriage, divorce, and the appointment of trustees and guardians were now handled by the Ministry of Justice and judges who held university degrees in law. While the ulama maintained their control over family laws, a few minor changes were also made in this area. The legal age of marriage was raised to thirteen and marriage contracts were now registered in civil bureaus. This latter point gave urban women the opportunity to stipulate a number of rights in their marriage contract such as the right to divorce if their husband took a second wife (Sanasarian 62).

Modern education became an important priority for the government of Reza Shah. But the purpose of a modern secular education in the Pahlavi era was not to encourage critical thinking but to shape loyal citizens who were devoted to the shah and his rule and were peacefully integrated into the new modernizing society, and to curtail the extensive authority of the ulama (Menashri 111; Keddie 95; Akhavi 39–42). Nevertheless, the new reforms substantially increased literacy rates among women. By 1933 over 50,000 girls attended 870 girls' schools, most of them public (Sanasarian 62). Furthermore, a variety of independent women's organizations and journals remained active in the 1920s. *Women's World* (a publication of graduates of the American School), and *Daughters of Iran* were strong supporters of unveiling.

The left-wing Patriotic Women's League (1922–32) sponsored the second regional conference of Women of the East in Tehran in 1932. Participants came from a variety of countries, among them Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, and India. The radical Lebanese chair Nur Himadah called for equal wages for equal work, greater political rights for women, changes in marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws, and more emphasis on women's education. The conference was both multiethnic and multireligious. Organizers spoke of the need for unity between Muslim and Christian women of the Middle East in their struggles for greater freedom. With a few exceptions, there seems to have been near consensus in the conference that unveiling was the first step toward greater emancipation of educated, urban middle-class women (Ustadmalik 112–15).

But Reza Shah would not tolerate any type of grassroots activity, be that on labor or women's issues. Though the shah's daughter Princess

Ashraf had acted as nominal head of the conference, Reza Shah ordered the Patriotic Women's League closed and instead encouraged the formation of the government-controlled Ladies' Center (Kanun-i Banuan) whose activities were limited to vocational training, education, and charity. The new organization was nominally headed by Princess Ashraf and her sister Princess Shams, and its affairs were directed by the long-time feminist Sadiqah Dawlatabadi. Political reforms would come strictly from the top, decreed by the shah himself (Sanasarian 68). Confident of his growing political strength, Reza Shah banned the wearing of the veil in 1936 (an ordinance that neither the Bolsheviks nor Ataturk had issued). The police enforced the law. The ulama at the holy cities of Qum and Mashhad once again resisted the new directive, but the shah crushed the opposition by force.

The reaction to the unveiling was mixed. Many urban middle-class women rejoiced at the new freedom they had gained and prepared European-looking suits and hats for the special day when they came out unveiled. Others were more reluctant since the veil had marked the physical boundary between acceptable and unacceptable gender roles, and also hid the poverty of most women. In more religious households, women would not leave their houses unveiled and remained indoors for years (Ja'fari).

Contemporary Iranian feminists have remained ambivalent in their assessment of the reign of Reza Shah. Many have argued that his repression of the clerical establishment, together with his support for unveiling and new educational and employment opportunities for women, weakened traditional gender relations and undermined the position of the ulama. Others, such as Nahid Yeganeh, have argued that the Civil Code of 1936, which gave men the right of divorce and custody and prohibited women from traveling or entering into education and employment without their husbands' permission, codified the existing patriarchal relations and thereby gave the clerics new authority on family matters (Yeganeh 5). What is clear is that women's bodies became the site of politics while grassroots advocates of women's rights were silenced. The matter of unveiling, initially raised by male and female activists as a radical political issue, was now adopted by the government, institutionalized, and deprived of its radical content.

By the mid-1930s all efforts to introduce women's rights on a grassroots level were co-opted by the modernizing state. This left the more radical advocates of women's rights with three options:

1. They could tone down their more radical stance and enter the government-sponsored organizations, through which they hoped to realize some of their objectives.
2. They could side with the conservative opposition to the shah, which included many members of the ulama; but this was not really an option,

since the opposition was vehemently opposed to the shah's reforms, especially the unveiling.

3. Or they could unite with the left-wing political parties.

But the social democratic and Marxist intellectuals were either co-opted by the government (such as Hasan Taqizadah, the constitutionalist leader) or pushed underground or into exile (such as leaders of the Iranian Communist Party that had been formed in 1920). By adopting the first option of joining the government-sponsored women's organizations, educated urban women, whether unwittingly or not, aligned themselves with a technocratic modernist government that improved the lives of a small elite minority while making life more difficult for the lower classes, including peasants, women carpet weavers, and textile workers. The undemocratic nature of this process of modernization would create new cultural divisions between the upper and lower classes. As Nikki Keddie has argued, "Reza Shah's work for rapid modernization from above, along with his militantly secularist cultural and educational program, helped create the situation of 'two cultures' in Iran. Upper and middle classes became increasingly Westernized and scarcely understood the traditional or religious culture of most of their compatriots" (111–12). The advocates of women's rights were no exception to this general pattern.

### **The Interregnum of 1941–53: Women's Organizations as Auxiliaries of Political Parties**

As the Second World War began, Allied forces took over Iran with Soviet forces occupying the north, and British forces taking control of the south. In September 1941 Reza Shah, accused of harboring pro-German sympathies, was forced to abdicate. His twenty-two-year-old son Muhammad Reza Shah replaced him. Paradoxically, war and occupation would bring a greater degree of economic activity and political freedom to the country. A multiplicity of political parties and trade unions were formed in this period. The two major political parties were the pro-British *Iradah-yi Milli* (National Will) and the pro-Soviet *Tudeh* (Masses) parties. The first decade of the twentieth century had focused on the subject of education for women; the debates in the 1920s and 1930s had turned to the subject of unveiling. The 1940s brought several other issues to the fore, such as women's suffrage, greater political participation in the new democratic order, and the concerns of working women.<sup>2</sup>

The Stalinist *Tudeh* party, with its more progressive agenda, attracted young intellectuals of various religions and ethnicities. The women's branch of the *Tudeh* Party was established in 1943. Its publication, *Our Awakening* (*Bidari-yi Ma*), called for greater educational and employment opportunities for women, better working conditions for workers, vacation

time, child care centers, and equal pay. The journal criticized the dictatorial rule of Reza Shah as well as the ulama's opposition to women's rights, and called for the formation of better schools and colleges for women. In 1944 Tudeh Party delegates in the Fourteenth Majlis called for women's suffrage but were rebuffed (Vatandoust 110–11; Sanasarian 72; Abrahamian 336). The Tudeh Party failed to gain greater public endorsement in part because of its steadfast support of the Soviet Union, and the Soviets demand for oil concessions in the north of Iran. In the early 1950s the Tudeh Party competed with the highly popular liberal Iranian premier Muhammad Musaddiq, who had called for the nationalization of Iran's oil industry.

The more open political climate and the new economic opportunities meant that women began to work in factories and teach in schools in large numbers. Some entered hitherto male-dominated professions such as medicine, law, or the sciences. Others earned advanced graduate degrees in the humanities and the social sciences at Tehran University. Several other progressive women's organizations, such as the Women's League (Jam'iyat-i Zanan), founded in 1942, and the Women's Party (Hizb-i Zanan) established in 1944, were also active in this period. While these organizations were independent from the government, they were nevertheless subservient to the political parties to which they were attached. Such institutional subservience was not particular to Iran but was a characteristic of most progressive women's organizations that acted as auxiliaries of left-wing political parties at the time. This was a tradition established by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and followed by left-wing parties around the world. In Iran women's rights issues became "secondary and subordinate" to the issues emphasized by the predominantly male political parties (Sanasarian 73). Even one of the most outspoken women's organizations of this period, *Zanan-i Pishraw* (The Forward Moving Women), which was attached to an anti-Stalinist left organization, placed greater priority on nationalist and general political demands than on issues of women's rights.<sup>3</sup>

But the years 1941–53 were not dominated by progressive political parties alone. The abdication of Reza Shah had also strengthened the antimodernist clerical opposition which had chafed under his programs of modernization and secularization. A vast majority of the ulama were determined to resurrect two issues: (1) the reinstatement of article two of the 1907 supplementary constitutional laws, according to which a council of clerics held veto power over the deliberations of the Majlis, and (2) the return of the veil.

In 1944, the ranking cleric Ayatollah Tabataba'i Qumi demanded that the restrictions on veiling that had been placed by Reza Shah in 1936 be removed. Many urban women, either because they were persuaded by the ulama or because they faced a hostile environment at home and in the

neighborhood, reverted to the veil. But they abandoned the face cover and adopted more colorful veils (as opposed to black veils) that loosely covered the body. Ruhollah Khomeini (Ayatollah Khomeini) was by this time a *mujtahid* (one who has received the *Ijazah* permission to interpret the laws of Shiite Islam) and was gradually being recognized as one of the leaders of the antimodernist religious opposition. His 1943 book, curiously titled *Kashf-i Asrar* (The Unveiling of Secrets) would soon be recognized as a manifesto of the religious opposition in Iran. Khomeini warned that “the unveiling of the women has been the ruin of female honor, the destruction of the family, and the cause of untold corruption and prostitution” (Amir Arjomand 204). Khomeini was equally adamant in his denunciation of coeducation and even music. “These schools [are] mixing young girls and young passion-ridden boys. [They] kill female honor, the root of life and the [source] of manly valour. . . . Music rouses the spirit of love-making, of unlawful sexuality and of giving free reign to passion. . . . It is [therefore] forbidden by the Sacred Law, and should not be included in the school programmes” (Amir Arjomand 204). In 1952, after urban women of Tehran, at the initiative of the Tudeh Party, collected some 100,000 signatures and petitioned the parliament for women’s suffrage, the ranking ulama labeled the women’s petition anti-Islamic and stopped Premier Musaddiq from accepting it (Sanasarian 75). It would take another decade before Iranian women gained the right to vote, which was granted from above by Muhammad Reza Shah.

Several changes in the politics of women’s rights had thus taken place in this period:

1. Once again the issue of women’s rights had threatened to divide the nationalist coalition. The antiroyalist coalition between liberals and the ulama was a fragile one that could only be achieved at the expense of women’s rights.

2. Progressive women’s organizations had become auxiliary branches of left-wing political parties who opted for a technocratic modernist agenda in Iran.

3. A new set of political hierarchies now prioritized the acceptability of women’s demands. Left-wing political parties sanctified the strict demarcation between economic or political rights and sexual or personal rights. Those demands that were defined as issues for women workers (employment, pay equity, health and education) were deemed acceptable, while others, which were aimed at the patriarchal family structure and required greater individual rights for women, were classified as “bourgeois” and hence unacceptable.

## **The Legacy of Muhammad Reza Shah: Modernization without Democracy**

In 1953 a CIA-sponsored coup overthrew the government of Musaddiq and brought Muhammad Reza Shah back to power. In 1961 the new Kennedy administration began to pursue a different foreign policy in Iran. The United States felt threatened by the leftist 1958 revolution in Iraq. The shah was therefore encouraged to carry out new reform projects, using the country's increased oil revenues, and to curb rampant government corruption. In 1963, in an attempt to respond to the new American policy and to pacify a series of student and teacher demonstrations, the shah presented his White Revolution, a six-point reform program that included both land distribution and women's suffrage. Six women were elected deputies to the Majlis while two others were appointed senators. In 1968 Dr. Farrukhru Parsa (1922–79), a medical doctor and educator whose mother had been one of Iran's early feminists in the 1920s, was selected as the first woman cabinet minister. Muhammad Reza Shah's various statements throughout the years demonstrated that he was no feminist, but he was convinced that women's education and greater participation in the labor process were "economically beneficial and would contribute to his modern image" (Keddie 179).

Reforms in women's status, such as greater emphasis on women's education and the 1968 recruitment of female high school graduates in the Literacy Corps, whose members taught villagers, increased the number of female students at the elementary and high school levels. Between 1970 and 1975 the number of girls attending elementary schools dramatically increased from about 80,000 to 1.5 million. The changes for urban women were impressive. By 1978, one-third of university students were women, with many entering nontraditional fields of study. In 1978 more women than men took the very difficult university entrance exams in the field of medicine (Menashri 179–82; Afkhami 335). Female literacy rates remained quite uneven throughout the country owing to a number of factors, among them the rural community's poverty, the tradition of early marriage for young girls, and the insufficient number of schools. The UNESCO statistics of 1977 for Iran stated that 91.7 percent of rural women compared to 51.9 percent of urban women were illiterate (Moghissi 211–13).

In 1966 Muhammad Reza Shah approved the formation of the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI), a new umbrella organization whose president was the shah's ambitious twin sister Princess Ashraf. By 1977–78 the organization had formed 400 branches, and its membership, mostly through institutional affiliations, was estimated to be around 70,000. Ninety-four Family Welfare Centers were also established in the country. The centers were responsible for literacy and vocational training, health

care, and legal counseling on issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance as well as day care facilities for urban lower-class women. The WOI facilitated research on a number of feminist issues, such as the sexist and derogatory portrayal of women in the media and in textbooks, and legal reforms (Sanasarian 85–88).

Mahnaz Afkhami, director of the WOI from 1970 until the dissolution of the organization in 1979, writes that all policy proposals had to be approved by the shah, “whose national role was the essence and symbol of patriarchy” (94). The new laws also had to pass by the vigilant eyes of the traditional ulama who denounced any actual or presumed variation from the shariat. Some of the reforms that the WOI proposed were not ratified by the Majlis because of vehement opposition by the religious and traditional sectors. But the organization succeeded in raising the minimum legal age for marriage to eighteen for women and twenty for men. Abortion was also legalized through a series of “internal memos” authored by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, and the WOI (Afkhami 333; Sanasarian 94).

The most important accomplishment of the WOI was the ratification of the 1967 Family Protection Law and a 1975 amendment to it. The new law altered the shariat-based civil code in divorce and polygamy while claiming to follow Shiite Islamic doctrines faithfully. It curtailed a Muslim man’s uncontested authority to divorce his wife at any time or for any reason (Qurbani). The Family Protection Law did not prevent a financially well-off man from taking another wife, but it secured the opportunity for his first wife to sue for divorce in such a case. As a result of this law the divorce rate decreased somewhat from 217 out of 1000 marriages in 1968 (fourth in the world) to 175 out of 1000 marriages in 1975. The greatest limitation of the Family Protection Law, however, was the lack of any provisions for financial support of the divorced woman. Neither the earlier civil code nor the new Family Protection Law gave women any share in the property the couple had acquired during the period of their marriage. As a result, a man could still pressure his first wife into consenting to his taking a second wife (Sanasarian 149).

The response of the antimodernist ulama was predictable. Khomeini issued a fatwa (religious edict) in which he declared that the Family Protection Law violated Islamic doctrines. “Women who are divorced [according to the rulings of Family Protection Law] should consider their divorce null. They are still considered married. If they remarry they have committed adultery. Men who knowingly marry such women are also committing adultery and must be punished according to religious laws. Their children will be considered illegitimate and have no inheritance rights” (Yavari 98).

Despite the many positive accomplishments of the WOI, the organization remained unpopular with the liberal and left opposition as well as

with many ordinary women because the WOI was directly identified with the regime, whose undemocratic nature and authoritarian policies were deeply resented. The WOI's close identification with the Pahlavi regime also allowed the conservative clerics to portray feminism as an elitist and foreign concept aimed at the destruction of the Muslim family.

The lack of political democracy and independent trade unions in factories and workplaces pushed workers further into the mosques and theological seminaries, the only places where grievances could still be aired. From the early 1950s to the late 1970s industrialization increased the number of women workers. In 1956 about 9.7 percent of the paid work force in the modern industrial sector was female; by 1976 this number had increased to 13.8 percent. Women remained a source of cheap labor in the older labor intensive industries and in the traditional small-scale industries, where they had little access to the day care centers, social insurance, or health care facilities that the more modern large-scale industries were required by the Labor Law to provide for their workers. At the same time a mass migration of men to the urban areas had substantially increased women's unpaid labor and responsibility in the agriculture sector (Ladjevardi 213–14).

These important demographic changes had correspondingly significant social and cultural ramifications, especially in the family. As Deniz Kandiyoti has argued in relation to other Middle Eastern women, the old "patriarchal bargain" in which a young bride remained a docile and subservient wife and daughter-in-law in return for the promise of future respect and financial protection had altered with women's entry into the paid labor market ("Islam and Patriarchy"). Even if her income was paid to her husband, she gained new rights in the household. She could demand greater priority for the the financial needs of her children, as against those of her in-laws, or even insist on separate living quarters away from the extended family.

By 1978 a "quarter-century of repression had effectively destroyed all free labor unions, all independent professional associations, and all opposition parties with grassroots organization" (Abrahamian 516). In the absence of independent trade unions, political associations, or other support networks that might have helped workers through this perilous stage of transition and its accompanying crisis of identity, the role of the clerics became even more important. In a series of interviews with several retired Iranian industrialists who headed large modern factories in Tehran between the years 1953 and 1979, it became clear that not only workers but also managers appealed to the authority of the ulama as mediators in labor-management and family conflicts. Local clerics arbitrated in labor-management disputes, encouraged workers' productivity, and acted as counselors in family disputes. Many of these disputes resulted from women's paid employment and attendant changes in gender relations. In

the Three Star Shoe Factory in Tehran it was a common practice for the management to call the local *akhund* (low-level cleric) to the factory for a public sermon twice a year. The *akhund*, who was paid by the management, would lecture the young male workers to obey their parents, ask women workers to be more deferential and respectful toward their husbands and in-laws, and urge both to become more religiously observant.<sup>4</sup>

Students as well as factory workers suffered from the consequences of an uneven process of development in the country where industrial and economic modernization was encouraged while democratic political institutions were banned (Abrahamian 427). In the 1970s the government facilitated higher education for lower-class students by reducing tuition costs and providing living accommodations, student loans, subsidies, and medical care. Again, no parallel democratic institutions or student organizations, which could have explored the multifaceted social and cultural changes that these new educational policies brought about, were allowed to function. Savak (secret service) agents infiltrated all colleges and universities and regularly reported on student or departmental activities (Menashri 282–99).

Students, many of whom were the first generation in their traditional middle-class or lower-middle-class families to attend the universities, faced a severe crisis of identity. In particular, boundaries that separated acceptable gender behaviors from unacceptable ones became confused and blurred. Shifting gender roles created many puzzling questions: Were the young female high school students who wore short skirts and exchanged glances and maybe secret love notes with young boys immoral and unethical? Were the young female college students who discussed school assignments, shared meals, and walked on the streets with their male classmates loose? What about the young divorced women who attended the colleges and universities, or those who were employed as secretaries, nurses, and civil servants and lived in apartments of their own?

## **The Influence of Ali Shariati; the Revolution of 1978–79**

Political frustrations and cultural anxieties would find a response in the lectures and writings of Ali Shariati (1933–77), the lay Muslim theologian who had earned a doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne and had been involved in the opposition movement to the Algerian war while in Paris. Soon after his return to Iran in 1964, Shariati gained a reputation as a powerful lecturer and speaker first at Mashhad University and then at the progressive Husainiyah Irshad theological seminary, which was opened in Tehran in 1969. Shariati's lectures were recorded and distributed, and his controversial ideas were discussed widely. After a series of

confrontations with the regime and several arrests, Shariati left the country once again in 1977, and he died shortly afterward from a heart attack in London at the age of forty-four. Rumors implicating the regime in his death soon elevated Shariati's stature to that of a *shahid* (martyr). More than anyone else he would become the ideological father of the Iranian Revolution of 1978. He also epitomized the final coalescence of radical modernists and technocratic modernists by calling for radical political change and greater industrialization while insisting on traditional gender roles in the family.

Shariati called for a revolutionary concept of Islam, one that challenged the Pahlavi autocracy and brought a new generation of Muslim thinkers like himself to power. Thousands flocked to Shariati's sermons and adopted the way of life he preached. Young women students began to wear the traditional Islamic headscarves and eagerly attended his sermons, where Shariati spoke admiringly about the virtues of education and science. Here was finally a solution to the crisis of identity they faced. Shariati advised an acceptance of Western technology and science but rejected Western culture and political thought. This included Western liberalism and democracy as well as Marxist or existentialist expressions of humanism. While Shariati encouraged greater social and political participation by women, there was no place in his ideology for a concept of women's liberation that involved a radical change in traditional gender roles and sexual emancipation. The cultural revolution among Western youth, their demands for sexual as well as political liberation, were condemned by Shariati, who called such emancipation immoral and unethical, nothing but an advocacy of prostitution and a "liberation of bottoms." Shariati was speaking to an audience that had great ambivalence toward the changing roles of women and was convinced that many women in the West were duped by a capitalist economy that used women's bodies to sell more commodities. The model preached instead by Shariati was that of Japan, where Western scientific and technological advances were enthusiastically adopted and expanded upon, while traditional gender relations supposedly remained the same.

In attracting a new generation of alienated youth and galvanizing the opposition against the shah, Shariati had achieved what several generations of antimodernist clerics had failed to accomplish. Inadvertently Shariati had also shown the ulama a way to continue this process—by means of a new politicized concept of Islam that welcomed many of the technological advances of the modern world but rejected the cultural and social reforms of modernity. This strategy became even more influential once it was combined with an anti-imperialist discourse. It meant stressing issues such as the oppression of the poor, the need for a more just and equitable distribution of wealth, the struggle against imperialism, and the need for a revolution while reverting to traditional gender roles and religious values.

Khomeini, long respected for his austere lifestyle, his opposition to the shah, and his exile in Iraq, was able quickly to assume the mantle of Shariati after the latter's death even though he had objected to many of Shariati's actions and views while Shariati was alive. Shariati's radical students, many of whom became part of the anti-shah movement, the Mujahidin Khalq, flocked to Khomeini and soon elevated him to the position of supreme religious and nationalist leader. A series of mass protests and demonstrations, coupled with general strikes in major cities, toppled the government of Muhammad Reza Shah, who left the country in January 1979. Khomeini returned to the country on 1 February 1979 and was greeted by three million supporters in the streets of Tehran.

The speed with which the government of the Islamic Republic was institutionalized in 1979 stunned many of the young activist women who had demonstrated in the streets and worn the veil as a symbol of protest but now opposed the proposed theocratic state. Only a few weeks after Khomeini's return to Iran, he declared the Family Protection Law "un-Islamic" and therefore void. A year and a half after the revolution Iranian women faced a number of restrictions on, and violations of, their rights. These included: (1) compulsory hijab ("proper" Islamic dress for women that covers the whole body except the face and hands) for Muslim as well as non-Muslim women in public—failure to adopt the hijab became punishable by public flogging and or imprisonment; (2) the segregation of women in public institutions, schools, and universities as well as buses; (3) a lowering of the marriage age for girls to thirteen; (4) the reinstatement of easy divorce and polygamy for men; (5) pressure on young educated urban women and men to accept the Shiite Islamic tradition of *Mut'ah*, or temporary marriage; (6) limited custody rights for mothers and a reversal of the Family Protection Law which gave mothers guardianship over their children after the father's death; (7) a reinstatement of male guardianship in all major decisions of life, such as permission for employment or travel; (8) significant restrictions on women's employment; (9) the closing of day care centers to discourage women's employment; and (10) a broad definition of adultery that included the prohibition of sex between unmarried but consenting adults. These laws and others effectively reduced women to the status of second-class citizens who were treated with little dignity and respect inside or outside their homes.<sup>5</sup>

This drastic reversal of women's rights in all areas except suffrage and women's right to education was made possible because of several ideological changes in the century-old antiroyalist movement. First, the anti-modernist Khomeini, unlike his ideological predecessor in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, had embraced the technological and scientific aspects of modernity, though not its social and cultural dimensions. Khomeini had also learned a great deal from the radical Muslim theologian Ali Shariati, as well as from left-wing organizations, about ways of developing a politicized concept of Islam. Essen-

tially Western Marxist terms such as “colonialism,” “imperialism,” “exploitation,” and “social revolution” abounded in the speeches and lectures of Khomeini and his followers in 1978–79 and continued to be used after the revolution.

Second, there had developed a nearly total ideological rupture between feminists and leftists and between women who supported the concept of revolutionary Islam and those who advocated women’s liberation. The vast majority of the Iranian left, whether the Stalinist Tudeh Party, the Maoist Pakar, or the various branches of the Fada’iyan, maintained a highly dogmatic view of Marxism, one that adhered to an Engelsian-Stalinist interpretation of base-superstructure. It was the old argument that women’s oppression under capitalism was a result of class contradictions and “cultural imperialism.” Independent women’s organizations were unnecessary under either capitalism or socialism. Under capitalism they might divert attention from the “main goal” of the movement and under socialism there would be no need for them (Shahidian). But also, insofar as women’s rights were concerned, the left had reverted to a “technocratic modernist” position that denied the reality of patriarchal relations among all classes of society and refused to address issues such as sexuality, gender inequities, and the need for a reform of family laws. The writings of Shariati, an amalgam of crude Marxism and liberation theology, and the lectures of Khomeini, which advocated a politicized “anti-imperialist” concept of Islam, were not so far from the left’s view that feminism was “decadent.” In both views feminists were either naive or they were outright “tools” of the imperialist powers. Imperialist countries “advocated” a feminist agenda through which they undermined the indigenous culture and resistance of Third World countries and eventually colonized them.

Third, the near total identification for fifty years of feminist issues with the Pahlavi regime had created such a complete cultural rupture in Iranian society that the new government of the Islamic Republic had little difficulty securing the support of large contingents of women: hence women’s suffrage was maintained. These women, who came mostly from traditional bazaar middle-class or lower-middle-class families and thus were affected strongly by the shifting gender roles in the second half of the twentieth century were further encouraged by a series of rather sophisticated editorials that appeared in the popular journal *Zan-i Ruz* [Today’s Women] during 1978–79 that promised them a “third way” against the evils of both capitalism and communism. An ideal Islamic society could be formed if everyone joined the revolutionary movement and condemned the “infidel” and “imperialist” feminists (*Zan-i Ruz*, 1978–1979).

## The 1990s: A New Generation within the Islamic Republic

Sixteen years after the revolution, it is difficult to find this type of enthusiasm for the Islamic Republic among Iranian women. Women's journals affiliated with the government such as *Nida*, *Hajar*, *Payam-i Zan* continuously complain about the "lack of political and ideological dedication" of Iranian women who take off the mandatory scarf at the first opportunity and resist Islamist dictates by wearing plenty of makeup.<sup>6</sup> Even strong supporters of the Islamic Republic such as three-term member of parliament, Marziyah Dabbagh, who was a devotee of Khomeini for decades, has complained about the extreme difficulty with which she and a few other women have passed a handful of laws favorable to women in the parliament.

The government of the Islamic Republic has had to compromise in some areas. Women were readmitted to the fields of engineering and agriculture at the universities. A law similar to parts of the old Family Protection Law was ratified in 1992 requiring couples to obtain a certificate of nonreconciliation from the courts before applying for divorce. The government has also encouraged prenuptial agreements in which women can demand a future right to joint property, or reserve the right to seek divorce if their husbands remarry. Many women waive these rights at the time of marriage in return for the right to continue their education or to seek professional employment. Women can now request "remuneration" in exchange for the years of service they performed at their husbands' house if the husband initiates divorce on "unreasonable" grounds. But what deserves remuneration (cooking? cleaning? taking care of the children? or only sex?) and what constitutes "unreasonable conduct" by men remain vague issues. Women judges can now act as assistants to male judges in family courts. The legal marriage age was raised from thirteen to fifteen for women, and abortion is now permitted under certain conditions. The husband's permission is not required for an abortion, but the court must give permission. This change in abortion law came in response to a skyrocketing birth rate (3.9 percent) in 1983, now reduced to 2.3 percent (Ramazani).

Judging from the novels, short stories, and women's journals published in Iran, important changes are taking place on a much deeper cultural level and a new awareness of women's rights is taking root. Shahrnush Parsipur's and Moniru Ravanipur's feminist novels have become the subject of tremendous interest as well as of rave reviews in exile journals. A feminist journal recently began publication. *Zanan* (Women) has published provocative interviews with jailed women, working women, and teachers. The journal, in open solidarity with feminist issues, writes of women's oppression and the vileness of the patriarchal culture. *Zanan* also publishes essays by Western feminists, such as Susan Faludi, who

criticize the patriarchal structure of Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup> There is an impressive network of exile feminist organizations and publications in the United States and Europe that functions as “consciousness raising” groups and regularly hold cultural and artistic events. Women writers and poets from Iran are frequently invited to these gatherings (Bauer; Hegland, Brunet, and Fisk).

These new expressions of feminism are supported by a fairly large number of expatriate Iranian men in Europe and the United States. Many former activists, both men and women, lament their earlier ignorance of feminist issues, and it is almost certain that a future democratic movement in Iran would include new feminist dimensions.

Nevertheless, in many Middle Eastern and North African countries today, independent secular feminist movements are steering a highly dangerous course between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one side is the antifeminist religious opposition offering women a degree of security and protection if they adhere to the strict code of conduct of the Muslim patriarchal culture but denying them their individual rights. On the other side are secular and authoritarian governments giving women a degree of economic and social equality yet denying everyone, including women, autonomous political and civil rights. This was the quagmire Iranian women found themselves in the late 1970s. Today, yet another political discourse is taking shape inside and outside Iran, one that includes the voices of secular oppositional intellectuals and advocates of women’s rights. Until the full implications of women’s emancipation and the drastic changes in gender roles it implies are understood, however, something that has yet to happen, the fate of feminism and by definition the very concept of human rights in Iran remains unclear.

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## Notes

1. In developing this essay I have found a critical appropriation of Michel Foucault’s work on modernity, discipline, and the body to be useful. Such an appropriation, however, does not imply an acceptance of some of this author’s other arguments, such as Foucault’s denial of individual consciousness and agency. Rather, I find a phenomenological/existentialist reading of the body as

a *situated subjectivity* more helpful for a feminist historiography. Such a perspective acknowledges the argument that subjectivities are culturally and socially constructed without denying the role to individual consciousness and agency. Similarly, I have tried to adopt a more complex (dialectical) view of discursive paradigms and forms of resistance, paying special attention to the process whereby competing discourses incorporate aspects of other, resisting discourses and hence become more resilient.

2. Similar debates existed in the more mainstream women's journals of this period and not only those affiliated with the left, as in *Zaban-i Zanan*, *Majalah-yi Qiyam-i Zanan*, and *Ayandah*.
3. See *Zanan-i Pishraw* 1.1 (Spring 1953), kindly given to me by Amir Pichdad
4. Interview with Naim Afary, Los Angeles, 1992.
5. Keyhan (London) 1981–94. For an English summary see Tohidi.
6. See also Erika Friedl, who writes with moving clarity about rural women's resentment toward many cumbersome religious traditions that are now enforced.
7. For more information on *Zanan* contact Zanan, PO Box 15875-5563, Tehran, Iran. Fax no. 836498.

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