

# Gender and Sexuality in Iranian Politics

## Peg Strobel talks to Janet Afary

*Janet Afary is professor of Religious Studies and Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her Sexual Politics in Modern Iran won the British Society for Middle East Studies Annual Book Prize. —PS*

**PS: How are attitudes in Iran about romantic love, marriage, and sexuality changing? And how do these changes affect politics?**

**JA:** Iranians are more secular compared to many other parts of the Middle East, including Egypt. Many people no longer want arranged marriages. The median age of marriage in the country is 24; in the capital city, at about 27. Love-based marriages, unmarried couples being together in public or kissing or holding hands — these activities, though taboo, are more common in urban communities.

It's women who are breaking barriers and taking risks, but in many parts of the country a woman who has a dating relationship before marriage becomes quite vulnerable if the community finds out. These love-based marriages are sometimes fragile compared to an arranged marriage, where the entire community backs it. The wife expects respect and to some extent reciprocity in a more arranged marriage, but not necessarily love. Most love-based marriages break some taboos, marrying outside your class, ethnic group, or religion. If you divorce, in a culture where employment rates of women are very low, if your family of origin doesn't take you back, you're in a really dire situation. Because men haven't changed that much. On the one hand, they want love-based marriages, but they still haven't given up on traditional norms about women's behavior.

**PS: What about same-sex relationships?**

**JA:** In the Quran, male homosexuality is a punishable sin but female homosexuality is not mentioned. Punishment for male homosexuality was rarely carried out, say in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, male same-sex, status-defined relationships were tolerated so long as the sexually subordinate partner was lower status and the relationship took place in private spaces (houses, palaces) rather than public ones (parks and gardens). Elite men routinely kept boy concubines in their residences, for example.

The rise of the Islamist movement in the 1970s coincided with the birth of the gay rights movement in the West. Islamists then targeted both Western feminism and Western gay rights. They mostly ig-

nored this indigenous form of same-sex relationships, which had continued in the margins of society, including seminaries. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), like the U.S. right, activated his base against gays.

**PS: Many Westerners assume that Islam is anti-sex. Is it?**

**JA:** Islam recognizes both men and women as sexual beings. Jurisprudence manuals discuss sex and sexuality in great detail. A man may not deny his wife sexual pleasure. One of the few grounds for a woman to be granted a divorce is her husband's impotence.

**PS: What about birth control and abortion?**

**JA:** In medieval times, birth control was acceptable in Islam and quite prevalent. Women could practice abortion up till four months (when ensoulment was assumed to take place). Clerics recommended but didn't require a husband's approval. Birth control became a major political issue in Iran after the 1979 revolution, and again during the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, when the Catholic church and Muslim clerics aligned against it.

**PS: How did these contested ideas about gender and sexuality intersect with politics?**

**JA:** The 1979 Iranian revolution resembles Donald Trump's recent victory: the rural/urban divide, anger at uppity women, antagonism toward minorities (religious minorities, whether Sunnis or Christians or Jews or Baha'is). But in Iran there was also a coalition of leftist anti-imperialists and dissident religious populists. Islamists initially banned contraceptives, but when faced with a population explosion in the mid 1980s, they promoted birth control. But on issues that their male base is angry about, they have hardly given an inch in nearly 40 years: polygyny, women's rights to divorce, community property, sexuality, and issues related to women's empowerment, particularly middle- and upper-middle-class empowerment.

The Islamists were initially good at advocating gender policies that helped the poor, education, vaccination, health care, clean water, and affirmative action in education for those who participated in the Iran-Iraq war. That's why poor women supported a regime that has remained hostile toward the feminist agenda.

**PS: Is feminism seen as a Western idea?**

**JA:** In the 1920s and 1930s, many middle or up-



perclass women's rights activists decided to support the shah's autocratic modernist regime only because it gave women many opportunities, and the alternative included clerics who were opposed even to women's education. In 1979, when Islamists came to power, they used that support to discredit feminism. But now, many people call themselves feminists. The big issue is more about personal freedoms: rights to your own body, birth control for single women, right to divorce, love marriages, and no longer education and employment.

**PS: What would you say to Western feminists who want to be in solidarity with Middle Eastern feminists?**

**JA:** Social media and the Internet have opened up many possibilities. To give one example, As director of the Iranian Studies Initiative at UCSB I run a digital internship program for students who want to help immigrants in the United States and women's rights advocates in the Middle East. Many of our U.S. students are heritage students and know one of the languages of the region. Others enroll in our Persian or Arabic language classes before signing up for the internships. Our students help edit

women's rights publications in the region, create PowerPoint presentations for introductory courses in women's studies, and do research on women's health concerns, as well as human rights of religious and sexual minorities. This information is created in consultation with women's organizations in places such as Iran, Afghanistan, or Egypt. Our students also work with small non-profits in the U.S. that have direct links to the Middle East. Nearly all of these non-profits are organized by U.S. feminists of Iranian heritage. The experience is often an enormously important, and sometimes life-altering, one for our UCSB students and their choice of career after graduation. ❖

*Peg Strobel, emerita professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, serves on DSA's National Political Committee, and co-chairs DSA's Feminist Working Group. For more information about this topic, see Roger Friedland, Janet Afary, P. Gardinali, and C. Naslund, "Love in the Middle East: The Contradictions of Romance in the Facebook World" Critical Research on Religion, 4: 3 (December 2016): 229-258.*

---

## Films Worth Talking About

Join other DSAers for national discussions about insightful films. Go to <http://www.dsausa.org/calendar> to RSVP and receive information on how to join the conference calls. You can view the films online or through your local library at little or no cost.

**When Abortion Was Illegal, Sunday, March 26, 8:00 p.m. ET** Nominated for an Academy Award in 1992, Dorothy Fadiman's documentary reveals, through first-person accounts, the experiences of women seeking abortions before legalization in 1973. Join Amanda Williams, executive director of the Lilith Fund, to discuss challenges to reproductive justice and abortion access. Learn about how to participate in April Bowl-A-Thons to raise funds for low-income women to obtain abortions. This discussion is not listed on DSA's website. Go here [http://www.dsausa.org/mar-26-2017-at\\_8pm\\_20170326](http://www.dsausa.org/mar-26-2017-at_8pm_20170326) to RSVP to receive call-in information.

**People's History in Texas, Sunday April 2, 8:00 p.m. ET** Join DSA members Glenn Scott and Richard Croxdale to discuss videos produced by People's History in Texas, a project that brings to life the stories of ordinary Texans in significant socio-political movements. They will discuss *The Rag*, which tells the story of an influential underground paper based in Austin from 1966-77. Go to [peopleshistoryintexas.org](http://peopleshistoryintexas.org) and click on "documentaries."

**Rosa Luxemburg, Wednesday, May 31, 9:00 p.m. ET** Not your standard biopic, this film by feminist filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta won the German Film Award for best feature film in 1986. Star Barbara Sukowa was named best actress at the Cannes Film Festival for her portrayal of the Marxist theorist and economist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919). Luxemburg played a key role in German socialist politics. DSA member Jason Schulman, editor of *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, will lead the discussion.

**Free State of Jones, Sunday, June 11, 8:00 p.m. ET** Join Victoria Bynum, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History, Texas State University, San Marcos, whose book by the same title served as the basis for the film. During the Civil War, an armed band of Confederate deserters led by Newt Knight, a non-slaveholding white farmer, battled against the Confederacy in an uprising popularly known as "The Free State of Jones." Joining Knight in this rebellion was Rachel, an enslaved woman who had learned how to read. From their relationship, there developed a controversial mixed-race community that endured long after the Civil War had ended. Directed by Gary Ross and starring Matthew McConaughey and Gugu Mbatha-Raw.