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# The Women who Stayed

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THE WOMEN WHO STAYED

by

LeAnne Ulrey  
B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree

Department of History in the Graduate School  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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In the history of the country of Iran, women have always been active in public life in several ways. They have formed groups, participated in protests, and tried to generate change and speak against what they viewed as wrong or unjust. While some might argue that the state has complete control and that women do not have very much say in matters concerning their own lives, other scholars show that there are many different kinds of resistance to the state, and all of these forms of resistance are significant. Agency can exist in a situation, regardless if the individuals or groups showing agency actually succeed in gaining freedom from the powers that oppress them. The agency of these women has long been recognized by historians; Iranian women are not voiceless or helpless victims, but active participators in their own lives. Shahin Gerami and Melodye Lehnerer contend that the various actions which Iranian women took to change their lives “whether through open and direct negotiations, collective resistance, subversive techniques, individual co-optation, acquiescence, or collaboration are illustrations of women’s agency within a fundamentalist framework.”<sup>1</sup> Parvin Paidar also discusses the issue of agency concerning Iranian women: “many aspects of women’s participation in national processes and their sources of power and authority within the family, community and nation have now been recognized within the field of Middle Eastern women’s studies.”<sup>2</sup> It is essential when studying Iranian women to emphasize agency, understand nationalism and how it shaped women’s lives, and discuss the various family laws,

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<sup>1</sup> Shahin Gerami and Melodye Lehnerer, “Women’s Agency and Household Diplomacy: Negotiating Fundamentalism,” *Gender and Society* 15, No 4 (August, 2001): 557.

<sup>2</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Processes in Twentieth-century Iran*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

education, and the significance of the veil, and how these important issues have changed over time. By doing so, it becomes possible to understand that while these laws have changed back and forth over the years as different political leaders have been elected, and at times it does not seem as though women's lives are improving, women have demonstrated that they are active agents in their own lives, striving to create a better way of life for themselves as well as future generations. While many Iranians fled the country after the Islamic Regime took power, and only recently have elected to return, I wish to study the lives of women who remained in Iran after the revolution, and to understand how they and their children, who grew up under the laws of the Islamic regime, coped throughout the last thirty years with all the challenges they had to face.

It is important when studying the women in Iran to be conscious of the fact that the experiences of women are going to be different based on several factors, including which economic and social class to which they belong, and where they reside, whether it be in rural areas or in the cities. Studying women in the cities can be especially beneficial since by the year 1976, according to James L. Gelvin, "almost half the Iranian population lived in cities."<sup>3</sup> Many changes occurred after the Islamic revolution for women living in rural areas as well, however, and so it would drastically limit the context of Iranian women to ignore those who reside in rural areas. Age is also an important aspect to consider when studying Iranian women, because women who grew up in the Pahlavi period thought very differently than women who grew up under the Islamic Regime. Pardis Mahdavi, author of *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*, especially focused on age, due to the fact that young adults, ages fifteen to thirty,

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: a History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 284.

comprise a large portion of Iran's population, and "they were the target of the Islamization project that hinged on the war; now they are supposed to be an index for the success of the Islamic Republic."<sup>4</sup> Women with more economic means are going to have more time to spend in protests and political groups as opposed to women who have to work, or are forced to remain inside the home because of the control of their husbands or guardians. Education and differing religious views are also important aspects to consider. The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted eight years, must be included when studying Iranian women because of the numerous consequences for Iranian women. Therefore, there are several different categories of analysis which could be used to study Iranian women from the revolution to present time, including class and gender. Some of the most important issues in studying Iranian women, which directly relate to their daily lives, are the areas of dress, education and family law.

Of course it is imperative that the concept of nationalism be discussed when attempting to understand the condition of women in Iran, both before and after the Islamic Regime took power. It is the very issue of nationalism, and symbols used to represent the nation, which caused so much change and conflict for Iranian women. Parvin Paidar reiterates this claim concerning nationalism and Iranian women: "one of the determining factors in shaping the position of women in the twentieth century Middle East has been considered to be the process of nation building."<sup>5</sup> Anthony D. Smith, in his book entitled *Nationalism*, defines the concept of nationalism in the following way: "an

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<sup>4</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Processes in Twentieth-century Iran*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.

ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation.’”<sup>6</sup> Identity was always a major concern in the country of Iran, and different leaders, as well as the people of Iran, throughout the years had different ideas about what constituted Iranian identity, and how women should properly reflect that identity. Nima Naghibi discusses women as nationalists in her book *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*. She states that in the early 1900s “Persian women, veiled, unveiled, or disguised in male garb, emerged into the public sphere demanding national and international recognition of their rights as women and as nationalists.”<sup>7</sup> It was the identity of being modern and westernized those women under the Pahlavi dynasty rejected and protested against up until the Islamic Republic gained power in 1979.

Women have always been symbols of the Iranian nation; the only aspect of this notion that changed throughout the years was how women should be portrayed in order to best represent the nation. In the Pahlavi period, women were to properly represent Iran by being modern and contributing citizens in society. After the revolution, Afsaneh Najmabadi states that women then became the national symbols of honor in Iran or “the symbolic location of social morality and cultural conservatism.”<sup>8</sup> Nima Naghibi also discusses the issue of women being symbols in Iran, and how this phenomenon is quite old, going back to the seventeenth century. Naghibi demonstrates that the concept of

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” *Women, Islam & the State*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 70.

motherhood being the foundation and an integral part of the nation was an old concept and only reinterpreted in slightly different ways by different governments in the Iranian nation. She points out that both the legislation to rid the country of Iran of the veil in 1936, as well as the law passed to make the veil mandatory in 1979 both forced the Iranian woman to be the national symbol, “as either secular, modern, and Westernized, or alternatively, as Islamic, modern, and anti-imperialist. Beneath these two polarized representations lies a desire to possess and to control the figure behind the veil by unveiling or re-veiling her.”<sup>9</sup>

While some may find it difficult to understand why women would support the Islamic Republic, and participate in the revolution, a critical study of modern Iranian history reveals some of the reasons for this support. Some women were dissatisfied with the current government, the Pahlavi state, for different reasons. Class is an especially important factor to consider when attempting understanding as to why some women supported the Islamic Republic, as Haleh Afshar describes in her article “Women, State and Ideology in Iran.” Upper class women, because some of their goals were in alignment with the views of the shah, gained some political influence and participated more in public spheres, and so some authors discuss upper class women suffering more during the Islamic Revolution, as they felt they had lost the freedoms they had worked so hard to achieve. These were the women who wanted more freedoms and rights in public and political life, and thought they would achieve these goals with the rise of the Islamic Republic. Women from the upper classes looked down upon working class women as backwards: “western and Iranian women from the privileged classes positioned

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<sup>9</sup> Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 38.

themselves as fully formed subjects against whom the less privileged Persian women were constructed as abject figures.”<sup>10</sup> These working class women saw upper class women as morally corrupt and without honor and dignity. Iranian women of middle and lower classes who had to work to support their families felt that they had lost the dignity and honor that was associated with the veil, and gained little as they were sometimes working to support idle husbands and children. Middle and lower class women wanted the government to be more Islamic in nature, western influence in Iran to be lessened, and the hijab, or veil, to no longer be viewed as a backwards style of dress. Before the revolution in 1979, many women in Iran were actively engaging in protests and public life, expecting that their lives would improve with the change in regime.

The Islamic Republic used the support of religious middle and working class women to its full advantage when it first took power: “the regime encouraged the political activism of women from more religious sectors of society, using them to clamp down on supporters of women’s rights and on modern urban women more generally.”<sup>11</sup>

Although most scholars would agree with the oppressive nature of the Islamic Republic, there is a debate among historians as to how oppressive or liberating the Pahlavi dynasty was, especially in regards to women. Afsaneh Najmabadi expertly outlines this debate. While those who support the Pahlavi dynasty point to the number of rights women gained in this period, such as suffrage in 1963 and election to the parliament and Senate, increased literacy, growing numbers of women in higher education and the workforce, and the family laws which helped protect women, other

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<sup>10</sup> Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*, xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009):274.

scholars debate that these changes did not reach very far beyond the upper middle class, and that the “overall economic and social changes under the Pahlavis intensified women’s oppression in Iran.”<sup>12</sup> Despite this debate, however, it is clear that many people in Iran wanted change to occur, and began to protest the existing regime. There were simply disagreements among groups over what sort of changes should take place; leftist groups wanted more radical political change, and religious groups wanted to focus on tradition, and have Iran ruled by the laws of Islam. Najmabadi emphasizes that in order to understand this shift from a quest of modernity to one of Islamic modesty, one must look at this revolution as one of politics instead of religion. This revolution was a “conscious political rejection of the West and the political models associated with it (be they nationalism, socialism,... a shift from modernization...to moral purification and ideological reconstruction.”<sup>13</sup> The veil was always a forefront issue in Iran, both before and after the revolution. Discussing the issue of the veil under the Pahlavi regime gives necessary context as to how women felt about this issue at the time of the revolution.

### **The Veil**

The veil has always been an important cultural aspect for Iranian women. Janet Afary describes the veil as a class and cultural marker, and it also held both a religious and political significance. Women of the upper classes who lived in urban areas wore a full veil, covering their entire body. Lower-class women as well as women who were not Muslim would wear looser veils. “Women of all social classes and religious

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<sup>12</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” *Women, Islam & the State*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity,” 64.

commitments wore their veils when entering shrines or going to Muharram religious gatherings.”<sup>14</sup> It was used to promote modesty among women, and women also used it for common purposes as well, such as protection from the sun. It could be used as a blanket for a nap, a towel to dry one’s face after washing, or for privacy so a woman could nurse an infant. The veil and the meanings of the veil have changed drastically through the years; it has been a sign of positive separateness from European women, who, because their faces were uncovered, were seen as immoral, a representation of backwardness and ignorance, and a sign of modesty and propriety. The veil has always had a direct impact on Iranian women because when it was outlawed, women could be punished if they were seen wearing one. After the revolution when it became mandatory to wear a veil, women would be severely punished if they went out in public without wearing a veil. Women, and men, in Iran have not always agreed on whether the veil should or should not be worn. Hence, it would be an incorrect generalization to assume that all women did not want to cover themselves, and all men wished for the continuity of the veil.

Reza Khan became Reza Shah in 1926. The Iranian government was secular, and had been strongly encouraging the people to be more modern, and to dress in western style. In 1936, there was an official unveiling in Iran, and it was expected that women would dress in modern, Westernized styles of dress. Some women resented this western style of dress because they felt it turned them into sex objects, and wanted a style of dress which would emphasize and return to women their dignity and honor; a government more Islamic in nature, they felt, would ensure the return of this honor. The new regime,

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<sup>14</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 210.

however, did not accomplish this in many women's point of view. According to Haleh Afshar, the new Islamic Republic "reduced them to the status of privatized sex objects required by the new religious order to be at the disposal of their husbands at all times."<sup>15</sup>

In 1981 when the veil was made mandatory in Iran, women could be put in jail or severely beaten if they came out in public without the veil. Ayatollah Khomeini passed away in 1989, however, and then dress codes began to be less enforced. Pardis Mahdavi describes the ways in which women, especially young women, began to demonstrate agency by wearing more revealing styles of dress: "getting away with looking un-Islamic by wearing makeup...and bright headscarves is a marker of success and means they do have the power to change the system, and this power gives some of them a sense of agency and citizenship."<sup>16</sup>

It is doubtful that many women were expecting the changes that occurred after the year 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini came into power. Janet Afary states: "they had thought that overthrowing the regime would bring about a more democratic society that would improve the rights of women in family and marriage."<sup>17</sup> Women lost many of the rights and freedoms they had enjoyed in previous years. They were largely forced out of public life, and were made to completely cover themselves if they ventured out of the home. Whereas before women were largely not permitted to wear a veil, now all women were forced to wear one and would be punished if they were seen in public without a veil.

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<sup>15</sup> Haleh Afshar, "Women, State, and Ideology in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 7, No 2 (April, 1985): 256.

<sup>16</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009):122.

<sup>17</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 277.

Pasdaran and Basij, the secret police, enforced hijab regulations, and would stop cars to check for alcohol, which is still illegal in Iran, Western music, or to see if women were wearing make up. The secret police would even interrupt weddings to make sure no laws were being broken.

The laws which existed under the Pahlavi regime were closely analyzed by the new regime, and were annulled if they were seen as un-Islamic, and so one such law which helped to protect women was removed; namely, the Family Protection Act.<sup>18</sup> The irony and tragedy behind the removal of laws which protected Iranian women, as Parvin Paidar points out, is the “state policy on the family adversely affected the very women whose mass support contributed to the creation of the Islamic Republic as we know it.”<sup>19</sup> The revolution was religious in nature, and so the government embraced Islamic law completely. The Iranian people were now expected to become even more conservative than ever, and those who did not agree with the new regime were quickly imprisoned, exiled, or even executed. While during the Pahlavi period the age of marriage was around the age of eighteen, after the Islamic Republic took power it was lowered to age nine for girls and age fifteen for boys. The state encouraged polygamy, temporary marriage, easy divorce for men; these practices were largely discouraged or outlawed in the Pahlavi period.

While Islamic law did have a large impact, however, some practices which strengthen the inequality between men and women are pre-Islamic or cultural practices,

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<sup>18</sup> Homa Hoodfar and Mehranguiz Kar, “Women and Personal Status Law in Iran: an Interview with Mehranguiz Kar,” *Middle East Report*, No 198 Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East (Jan-March, 1996): 36.

<sup>19</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Processes in Twentieth-century Iran*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 355.

such as polygamy, and were present before the Islamic Republic took power. Many people denounce these practices as being contradictory to the religion of Islam.

Valentine Moghadam describes some of these practices and shows that they were merely continued after the Islamic Revolution. Women could not perform many actions on their own without the permission of their fathers or guardians, such as acquire employment, rent their own apartments, or travel. Most secondary schools were already segregated by gender, although the new regime took great care to segregate universities after it came to power.<sup>20</sup> Mehri Honarbin-Holliday also emphasizes the idea that while there are some laws in contemporary Iran which derive from Islamic law Islam “advocates learning and voice for both men and women,” and there are several other aspects to take into consideration, such as “gender hierarchies, gendered politics, economic and educational shortcoming and constraints, accumulated socio-cultural misperceptions and familial circumstances.”<sup>21</sup> It is important to remember, therefore, that while the new regime was Islamic and the court systems followed Islamic laws as well, there were some restrictions on women which were already present in Iran and simply continued to oppress women.

Although most countries go through many changes in the course of seventy or eighty years, Iran stands out as a country whose political changes drastically changed the lives of both men and women. Although women’s lives have improved in a few ways since 1979, especially concerning education, women are still largely excluded from Iranian politics, and are not, for the most part, protected by family law. Domestic violence does occur, and in court the testimonies of two women equal that of one man.

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<sup>20</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003): 197.

<sup>21</sup> Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), 4

Divorce rates have increased, and polygny and temporary marriage remain legal. There is still much more room for improvement in the lives of Iranian women, and these last thirty years since the revolution have been a source of deep struggle and heartache for the women of this country.

In discussing the lives of women in Iran, it is absolutely necessary to understand the family laws, as these directly affect the majority of women in this country. While in the Pahlavi state there were several economic and political problems, and oppression against those opposed to the regime were similar to those enacted after the Islamic Republic took power, there were some laws which promoted and protected the rights of women. Abortion, for instance, was legal under the Pahlavi regime. One of the laws which improved women's lives was known as the Family Protection Law. This law made divorce more difficult to obtain. In order to receive a divorce, it had to be proven in court that the couple had irreconcilable differences. A husband could also not marry a second wife without the permission of the first wife, therefore also declining the amount of polygny in Iran. Religious leaders were opposed to this law, and so when the Islamic Republic took power this law was one of the first laws to be annulled.

Due to the fact that there have been several changes in family law in Iran for women since the revolution in 1979, it is important to study changes in divorce rates which occurred directly after the revolution. Akbar Aghajanian gives a thorough account of divorce rates in Iran from the late 1960s until 1983. Because the Family Protection law was removed from Islamic law, divorce rates went up considerably, and women were no longer protected from polygamous marriages and could become divorced at any time. Divorce rates increased over 200 percent in Tehran in the first decade after the

revolution.<sup>22</sup> Divorce for Iranian women could be devastating, especially if they did not work outside of the home. Aghajanian also gives necessary context to divorce rates in Iran after the revolution occurred. Not only was the Family Protection Law removed, there were other factors to consider as well, such as the war with Iraq, which had a very negative effect on Iranian families, the age of the women, and whether they were employed or stayed at home.

Although women who were employed were more independent and could live without the support of their husbands; according to Aghajanian: “most women do not work and do not receive their dowry, and must depend upon familial support.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if the women at this time were dependent upon their husbands for economic support, divorce could prove disastrous, and it would be even more difficult to resist the husband’s right to marry multiple women. In the case of divorce, women would lose custody of any children the couple had, and did not have any property rights.

Abortion became illegal after 1979, and birth control became difficult to access. Because of this, there was a large population increase in Iran, so that the population grew from 34 million people to 49 million.<sup>24</sup> This was the intended result sought after by the Islamic Republic, because the regime wanted soldiers to fight the war in Iraq. After the war was over, however, there was economic decline and an over population, and so the government began family planning programs. In 1989, birth control, and other forms of contraceptives, became accessible again, and the state enacted several other population

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<sup>22</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 283

<sup>23</sup> Akbar Aghajanian, “Some Notes on Divorce in Iran,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 48, No 4 (Nov., 1986): 755.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 339.

policies in order to limit the increasing population. The use of contraceptives greatly increased after this, so that while in 1976 there was a thirty-seven percent use, in the year 2000 it had been raised to seventy-five percent. To distinguish between rural and urban areas, women in rural areas increased the use of contraceptives from twenty percent in 1976 to seventy-two percent in 2000. Women living in urban areas increased the use of contraceptives from fifty-four percent in 1976 to eighty-two percent.<sup>25</sup> In 2005, a bill was passed which made abortion legal up to the fourth month of pregnancy in cases where the pregnancy could cause the death of the mother, or if the child was deformed. The process is a lengthy one, however, because both parents must give their permission for the abortion to take place, three doctors must approve the procedure, and the coroner's office must also agree with the diagnosis. In the case of abortion, Iranian women again demonstrate their agency over their own lives, because it is reported that about 80,000 illegal abortions are performed every year in the nation of Iran.<sup>26</sup>

When discussing the many changes which took place after the Islamic Republic came to power, it is essential to discuss the Iran-Iraq war, as it lasted eight years and had a profound impact on Iran as a nation, but on Iranian women in particular. The casualties of this conflict are uncertain, but at least 200,000 Iranians were killed and 600,000 Iranians and Iraqis were injured.<sup>27</sup> While it is expected that women experienced several negative consequences due to this conflict, there were positive results as well. Women suffered during this conflict because the government spent money meant for education

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<sup>25</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009): 237.

<sup>26</sup> "Iranian Parliament Liberalizes Abortion Law," *Reproductive Health Matters* 13, no. 26 (Nov. 2005): 186.

<sup>27</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 266.

and health on defense. Dress codes were strictly enforced during this time period because if women did not dress according to what was considered Islamic and proper, zealots accused them of shaming the martyrs of the war. One positive consequence, however, was that women were allowed many employment opportunities which had been previously been unavailable to them, because the men were away fighting in the war. Not only did they perform laundry and kitchen duties for the front, they also served as nurses in military hospitals and received jobs in government offices. While the Islamic Republic took great pains to get women out of the work force after the revolution, removing day cares and taking whatever other procedures necessary to limit women's presence in the public sphere, women had now become necessary in the workforce; day care centers were put back in place so that women could work. During this time women still had to wear the veil while at work, however.<sup>28</sup>

Human Rights Reports show that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, women had not gained back hardly any of the rights or protections they had possessed before the Islamic Revolution. In 1986, a law was passed which did give women some rights to property and alimony; however, men still did not have to give a reason for divorcing his wife. Although the dress code for women was not as strongly enforced as it was in the 1980s, women could still be punished if their dress was seen as inappropriate. In 1990, women gained some rights in the issue of employment, as they were granted ninety day maternity leave, a "job-back guarantee with no loss of seniority" and time allotted out of

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<sup>28</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," *Women, Islam & the State*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991): 69-70.

the day for mothers who breast feed their children.<sup>29</sup> Although in December of 1993 women were allowed to study all subjects in universities, they were still prohibited from traveling abroad to study. Women, for the first time since the revolution, were allowed to be judges in low-level courts. In the political arena, women in Iran also did not gain very much representation. According to the Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996, women only held nine of the 270 seats in government, and there were no female cabinet members at this time.<sup>30</sup> Honor crimes, however, were still present at this time. These crimes are acts in which women are killed by members of their families because they have supposedly brought shame to the family, usually by some sexual act such as adultery. The family members responsible are not punished for these crimes. If some family members of a female victim do want to take the murderer to court, they have to pay the murderer's court costs. Janet Afary discusses the disturbing fact that while in premodern Iran honor crimes were fairly rare and families would usually quietly preserve the honor of the family by a hasty marriage, abortion, or hymen repair, these crimes became much more frequent after the Islamic Republic came to power. Rather than the male members of the household deciding whether to punish a female member of the family, the state now exercised that control: "the idea that the state would drag an urban, middle-class woman to court and possibly execute her on charges of adultery, even if her family and community vigorously protested, was unprecedented not just in Iran but in the Muslim world."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003): 62.

<sup>30</sup> Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996 [Iran].

<sup>31</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 14.

As was previously stated, a distinction must be made between Iranian women who live in populated cities and women who reside in rural areas. While urban women had much more access to Western culture, education, and public spheres before the revolution, rural women were not bothered by some of the restrictions the regime imposed because they had never had access to these freedoms in the first place. Middle class and rural poor women rarely had the opportunity to go to Western cafes, dance, or attend movies without a chaperone; they did not swim in public pools, drive or have the opportunity to attend the university. There were more arranged marriages in rural areas and less divorce as well. After the revolution, middle class women and women living in rural areas actually gained some rights and privileges they had not had before, because now they could defy their fathers and participate in the war effort, join one of the health or other types of programs promoted by the state, and abstain from arranged marriage.<sup>32</sup>

Anthropologist Erica Friedl studies Iranian women in rural areas. She says that some Iranian men and Westernized Iranian women see some Iranian women, especially those living in rural areas and small villages, as unintelligent or backwards. For this reason, Friedl spent much time researching villages in Iran in order to release more accurate information on working class and rural women in Iran to show that they are not helpless, unintelligent victims, but strong women who must overcome tremendous obstacles in their daily lives. Friedl informs her readers that while some technologies have improved the lives of the villagers, such as the access of contraceptive pills to some women, various men going to Kuwait and coming back wealthy, and increased education, some have made women's lives more isolated, such as indoor plumbing removing the

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<sup>32</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 295.

need to go to the community water well, as well as the ability to build a new house keeping women isolated from each other, instead of building on to current houses. Religion and local superstitions keep these women under tight control, illiteracy inhibits them in some ways, and the public sphere has become a male sphere that they cannot enter. The relative isolation of these villages, which Friedl actually tries to insist is not so prominent, does not prevent the Islamic Republic from reaching these people, however. There were many consequences of the revolution, such as the women being forced to wear clothes which were darker. Despite all these obstacles, however, Friedl shows that these women show resistance, even in the presence of great risk. Some do mathematical calculations in their heads, make jokes about the government, and endure having children at an older age due to the inability to receive contraceptive pills.

Janet Afary shows that there have been even more improvements in rural areas in Iran in recent years. In the first few years of the twenty-first century, “a majority of villages had clean drinking water, electricity, paved roads...access to modern means of communication (television, radio, satellite dishes), schools and health clinics.”<sup>33</sup> These improvements in technology have also greatly benefited women and young girls who live in these areas. More girls have attended school and gone on to universities, and parents are more open to their daughters attending and doing well in school.

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<sup>33</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 306.

Education is one area where women have made positive strides. In 2003, “women’s tertiary enrollments exceeded those of men for the first time since universities were established in Iran.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the slow progress of improvement for women’s lives, the agency of Iranian women is apparent in the years since the Iranian revolution. Women did not disappear completely from the public sphere, but continued to resist the regime in whatever ways they could. Valentine Moghadam emphasizes this point: “that women continued to participate in public life during the repressive years of the 1980s suggests resilience and resistance to domination.”<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, there are several aspects that must be addressed when discussing the women in Iran after the Islamic Republic took power. There must be a distinction made between women who live in urban or rural areas, social and economic status, class, and age are all determining factors in distinguishing these women. Education, family law, and the controversies and meanings behind the veil are all essential when analyzing women’s issues. The agency of these women must be stressed, to show that no matter what the conditions are that these women face, they are active in striving to make their lives better, although not all forms of resistance challenge the state directly. Nationalism is an important aspect when studying Iranian women because it is nationalist ideology and national symbols which have motivated many women to resist and protest both the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic Regime due to the fact that Iranian women did not agree with the governments’ view of how these women should best represent the country of

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<sup>34</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003): 221.

Iran. The Iran-Iraq war had both positive and negative consequences for the women in Iran. While there is still much improvement to be made in Iran concerning women, changes have been made partly because of the active steps women have taken to improve their own lives.

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