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## WOMEN'S RESISTANCE AND CONSEQUENCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIMERIC SPACE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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WOMEN'S RESISTANCE AND CONSEQUENCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIMERIC  
SPACE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

by

Antonio Salazar III

B.S., Northern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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WOMEN'S RESISTANCE AND CONSEQUENCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIMERIC  
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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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in the field of History

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## **AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF**

Antonio Salazar III, for the Master of Arts degree in History, presented on April 10, 2020, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

**TITLE: WOMEN’S RESISTANCE AND CONSEQUENCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CHIMERIC SPACE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN**

**MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Hale Yilmaz**

Women’s struggle for equal rights in Post-Revolutionary Iran has left women to navigate between competing patriarchally prone identities, a secular pre-Islamic Persianness and a territorially bound Shi’a Islam. Because of Iran’s unique national identity, gender roles were dually affected. Representation of the male gender was normalized in both identities, stationing women into subordinate spaces populated by overlapping impositions on women’s equality. The necessity of women to carve out and occupy an elusive paradoxical space, for their voices to be heard, and which pursued modern women’s rights within the framework of Islamic ideological interpretation, left few terminal solutions.

The investigation of women’s voices illustrated how some Iranian women repositioned their resistance by working from within the chimeric spaces afforded them. Survival and persistence, liberal reinterpretation of Islamic texts, and building coalitions, allowed women to make inroads and stake claims, shrinking patriarchal controls. By occupying the implausible space between competing Iranian identities, women worked from within ideological coalitions, while inhabiting the margins of patriarchal prescriptions. While women’s efforts continue to be muted due to despotic state structures, chimeric spaces produce multi-generational, multi-feminist, and multi-gendered productions of patriarchal anxiety. Utilizing a creative hybridized chimeric space which is in constant flux positions Iranian women to penetrate, neutralize, and negate patriarchal impositions from orthodox interpretations of the Supreme Leader.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

A variety of factors contributed to the social, political, and cultural consequences of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As a result, Iranian women navigated a maze of ideological minefields while trying to establish public and private voices, leading to undulating battlefields upon which waves of Islamic oppression crashed only to be met with women's resistance as they reoccupied those conquered spaces in an unending dance for control of their own bodies. Sex and gender expectations and regulations in post-revolutionary Iran and beyond have had a long historical framework. This paper explores the contemptuous dialog in Iranian women's occupation of chimeric spaces. The term chimeric has been used to describe the indeterminacy of categorization, the impossible creation of a nation state, and the problematic if not illusive resettlement of individuals.<sup>1 2 3 4</sup> In these senses a chimera was hoped for but in fact was illusory or impossible to achieve. I am using the term chimeric to construct a political space that I have termed "chimeric space." Chimeric spaces were the locations between two hegemonic identities where Iranian women were able to modify and relaunch their hybridized resistances from the intersectional margins, always in flux. They appeared in the breaches, fissures, and cracks that women opened within the identities, a creative third space from which women were able to birth their resistances in a multitude of ways. Chimeric spaces were the political spaces claimed by

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<sup>1</sup> Ignacio Klich, "The Chimera of Palestinian Resettlement in Argentina in the Early Aftermath of the First Arab-Israeli War and Other Similarly Fantastic Notions," *The Americas*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (July 1996): 15-43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1007472>.

<sup>2</sup> Benita Parry, "The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?" *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 27, *The Politics of Postcolonial Criticism* (1997): 3-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3509129>.

<sup>3</sup> Julius Rowan Raper, "John Barth's "Chimera": Men and Women under the Myth," *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Fall, 1989): 17-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20077969>.

women within patriarchal constructions. These bastions were specifically gendered in ways that women were able to cause anxieties by commandeering agency from within this implausible space. By occupying these strongholds women were able to make their voices heard.

These spaces appeared as the most unlikely places from which to deliver positive results, but they were strategically chosen by Iranian women to allow for the constant navigation of the various indeterminate intersections they were forced to confront. Progress was made by identifying and positioning their efforts between disparate purveyors of power such as modernity and Islamic morality, Persian nationalism and Islamic fundamentalist Shari'a law, and democracy and despotic imposition. These spaces were uniquely expressed in Iran and were the locations women chose to navigate and occupy through the process of discarding, reconstructing, and accepting cultural traditions and Islamic interpretations. These efforts regulated their fashion, practices, and bodies, while acknowledging the perceived inferior status of women's voices in the public political sphere. The role of women in contemporary Iran is important and how they navigated the tightrope between participation and resistance, coupled with the ebb and flow of conservative state imposition, determined not only their access to social power, but promises to reveal the egalitarian future of Iran as a democracy.

My goal is to illustrate how some Iranian women repositioned their resistance to patriarchal imposition by occupying battlefronts which worked from within the changing chimeric spaces afforded them by an evolving political landscape. Iranian women's various methods of resistance allowed them to make inroads and stake claims which built on their expanding intrusion of patriarchal control. Over time, women have deftly pivoted to find the

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of "negotiated positionality," "in-between or hybrid positions," and "complex cultural and political borders on the cusp of political spheres," can be found in the postcolonial critiques of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gyan Prakash, respectively.

middle ground of whatever framework defined the political spaces, public and private, from which their resistance could be issued. They have made patriarchal bargains at times to survive to fight another day. They have pressured state systems to loosen control of women's bodies. They carved out spaces for their voices to be heard concerning women's issues like contraception, abortion, forbidden and mandatory veiling, and other issues involved with the maintenance of the valuation of virginity. Using various active and passive techniques, women were able to create and maintain space over time through unrelenting efforts, no matter how big or small they seemed, by knowing when and how hard to apply pressure. By seeking these chimeric spaces Iranian women were able to build coalitions and avoid the polarization which would intensify oppositional attacks.

Women implemented these gendered forms of resistance within a framework where the state mitigated the occupation of modern power, in spaces that were neither traditionally Iranian nor solely Islamic or, truly democratic nor unquestioningly despotic. By constantly being willing to redefine the foundational space from which their resistance could be launched, women continued to shift the patriarchal continuum in a more egalitarian direction. At times, women's resistance was active but often, it was passive. Women worked to challenge impositions in both obvious and subtle ways. Iranian women understood how to navigate the traditional and religious dictates governing their lives. More importantly, they knew when the best outcome for women's resistance was to merely survive, to fight another day. This method of survival and persistence played a key role in their successes. By occupying the chimeric space which resided between competing Iranian identities, women were able to resist from within ideological groups, while inhabiting the margins of patriarchal prescriptions, allowing them to slowly create breaches in a restrictive religious, social, and political sphere.



## WHAT IS RESISTANCE?

Resistance is how subordinate groups penetrate, neutralize, and negate the hegemony of superordinate groups. Some methods of resistance include the commandeering of symbolic tools, demystifying prevailing ideology, and resisting “close to the ground,” remembering that their efforts should remain rooted in the realities of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Various groups of women in Iran have resisted in numerous ways to the impositions of patriarchal controls. Over time, those who opposed the restrictions, like other subordinate resistance groups, determined methods which were the most effective for them, in those times and in those places. There was little resemblance to the formal organized political activity of large homogenous groups helmed by identifiable leadership. Instead, women’s resistance in Iran often appeared to have little or no coordination or planning, consisted of constant struggles for their own individual interests, stopped short of outright collective defiance, and make use of implicit understandings and informal networks.<sup>6</sup> Women used ordinary daily activities as munitions to battle societal, religious, and political impositions, employing everyday forms of resistance. Most often, protesting subordinate groups were crushed. Everyday forms of resistance were more effective over the long run and provided women with plausible deniability of any kind of coordinated membership which could provoke a more ferocious response. Unlike large-scale protest movements which only posed a momentary threat, everyday forms of resistance made no headlines.<sup>7</sup>

By engaging in these seemingly minor resistances, women in Iran were able to target multiple vectors of imposition in different arenas. While the women who participated did not

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<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. (New Haven: Yale Press University, 1985), 338.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii, 33.

always succeed at reaching their desired goals, the confrontations forced reactions to be selected from a narrowed pool of responses. “Policies may be recast in line with more realistic expectations. They may be retained but reinforced with positive incentives aimed at encouraging voluntary compliance. And, of course, the state may simply choose to employ more coercion.”<sup>8</sup> Either way, women’s safety resided in their ability to remain anonymous, whether they were resisting social, political, or religious impositions in public or private spaces.

Whether in the public political space or in the domestic arena, women employing these forms of resistance did so because these were the methods which enabled women to start carving out spaces for their voices to be heard. They worked from the spaces available within the constraints of the institutions of repression which precluded forms other than, “the individual, the informal, and the clandestine.”<sup>9</sup> These forms worked within the framework of systems of domination often appearing complicit or accommodating. In truth, by perpetuating a system of survival and persistence, women were able to stake claims, shifting the continuum of egalitarian issues, with lessened confrontations from authoritarian forces, due in part to the disinclination of superordinate groups to expose the “tenuousness of their authority.”<sup>10</sup> While carving out a location for discourses located in the chimeric spaces, women revealed their intention to resist through a system of survival and persistence, developing coalitions to work from within ideological groups, while inhabiting the margins of patriarchal prescriptions. Like other subordinate groups, women in Iran were, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “working the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 36.

system...to their minimum disadvantage.”<sup>11</sup>

### **IRANIAN IDENTITY AND ITS ROLE IN THE CREATION OF CHIMERIC SPACE**

Iranian identity has never been fully coherent. There has been a constant juxtaposition between a pre-Islamic glorification of Persianness, and a territorially bound membership in Shi'a Islam.<sup>12</sup> Women in Iran navigated in the space between these two identities, as they both contributed to the patriarchal impositions on women's rights. Normally, nationalist identity was not based on religious membership, especially because, according to Reza Davari, nationalism was a phenomenon based on a social construct among individuals independent of any other entity, including God, and was therefore, by its nature secular and liberal.<sup>13</sup> Iran occupied a unique space in the nationalism process.

Iranian political battlefronts witnessed shifts from Islamic monarchies rooted in Islamic traditions, to secular constitutional monarchies which glorified Persian identity, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. During the Pahlavi dynasty modernity was pursued relegating Islamic law to a subaltern position in the political discourse. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 instituted a democratic Islamic state structure based on the Shari'a law, vilifying secular discourses. Through it all, women's issues were used as tools to gain popular support, develop state legitimacy, and illustrate to a modern world, the progress Iran was making, leaving their “backwardness” behind.

The majority of Iran practiced Shi'a Islam. Membership in the modern world necessitated a move toward Western ideals and the embrace of their Persian (Aryan) heritage

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Politics,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 7.

<sup>12</sup> Alam Saleh and James Worrall, “Between Darius and Khomeini: exploring Iran's national identity problematique,” *National Identities* 17, no. 1, (2015): 74, DOI: 10.1080/14608944.2014.930426.

<sup>13</sup> Sussan Siavoshi, “Construction of Iran's National Identity: Three Discourses,” in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism*

which like Shi'a Islam, set Iran apart from the rest of the Middle Eastern nations, which practiced Sunni Islam and were majority Arab. Thus, in Iran, there was never a way to separate the two identities. Nor was there a way to combine them because of the conflict between modern Enlightenment ideals and the limitations of legitimate interpretation of the Islamic texts within the Islamic Republic of Iran's state structure which insisted on strict conservative readings of their holy texts. Women's persistent battles for space were similar in that they took place, first between modernity and Islamic morality, then in the space created by the duality of Persian nationalism and the Shari'a law, and ultimately, within the interval formed by democratic polity and the authoritarian imposition of a conservative interpretation of Islamic texts. In each situation, women had to create space between two titanic identities which rarely overlapped, outside of their ability to construct, "others", relegating women to a subordinate status.

## CHAPTER II

### MULTIPLE VECTORS OF PATRIARCHAL INTERSECTION

#### CONSTRUCTING SPACES FOR WOMEN

The subordination of women according to patriarchal structures was not a new development at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Divine sanction of male guardianship predated Islam.<sup>14</sup> “The message of Islam...comprehended two tendencies that were in tension with each other. Patriarchal marriage and male dominance were basic components of the institution of marriage as established by Muhammed...and yet Islam preached an ethical egalitarianism as a fundamental part of its broader spiritual message.”<sup>15</sup> Some sects gave primacy to the ethical component of the Islamic message and other more orthodox sects focused on the fundamentals of the texts using the law to bind these ideals to its followers. This helped to establish pre-Islamic traditions by codifying the practices into the lives of Muslims through Shari’a.<sup>16</sup> In this way, as with other religions, orthodox Islam became a vehicle for the multiple vectors of patriarchy which existed in societal, cultural, and political realms. Muhammad’s marriage to Khadija Al-Kubra was not patriarchal in the usual sense. She was previously married and widowed twice, before marrying Muhammad. She had a large trade caravan that eclipsed many owned by men in the region. She had her own servants and refused many other suitors before she pursued Muhammad’s hand in marriage. He was poor but agreed to her proposal although, and perhaps because, she had the means to support herself. They were monogamously married for twenty-five years, entering the marriage with children from previous marriages.

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<sup>14</sup> Camron Michael Amin. *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, edited by Beth Baron and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 58.

Much has been blamed on the *Hadith* that were put into practice based on Muhammad's life, but it was only after Khadija Al-Kubra died that he started living in polygamous marriage arrangements. Orthodox Islam, in instituting specific practices into their legal code have illustrated the tensions between competing interpretations of the Quran and the Hadith and misconceptions which superimposed the start of Islam and the establishment of these traditional patriarchal customs. Women's roles and practices including seclusion, genital mutilation, subordination to men, and donning the veil were incorrectly attributed to Islam. "A closer examination of the historical evidence, however, reveals that the practices in question pre-date Islam by many centuries."<sup>17</sup>

As Islam spread out of Arabia, it was adopted by people who were either unfamiliar with traditional Arabian customs, and were thus unable to correctly attribute them, or they also practiced the same cultural traditions and simply incorporated the customs wholesale. Thorkild Jacobsen has noted, "the mythmakers could not have 'depicted a society quite outside their experience and unrelated to anything they or their listeners knew."<sup>18</sup> Each region interpreted and incorporated these laws into their established code which took shape in diverse forms across the Islamic world, assisting in the deterioration of women's positions.

Shi'a Islam was introduced to the lands of Iran as a state religion by the Safavid Empire. It entrenched patriarchal customs into societal practices through orthodox interpretations establishing them as male Koranic duty. Mohammad Baquer Majlesi, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Islamic jurist illustrated this by stating, "A woman's value lays in her ability to produce children and to please

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>17</sup> Guity Nashat, "Women in the Middle East 8,000 B.C.E – C.E. 1800," in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History*, edited by Guity Nashat and Judith E. Tucker (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Nashat, "Women in the Middle East 8,000 B.C.E – C.E. 1800," 7.

her husband. Her inherent lack of honor and intelligence required the man responsible for her to shield her from strange men, from suggestive parts of the Koran, and even from her own sexual desires. (via circumcision)”<sup>19</sup>

Following the fall of the Safavids and a short feuding period the successors of the state were the Qajars. The Qajar Empire championed the traditional orthodox legacy of the Safavid Empire. They were met with dissidents who wanted change. They were called the renewalists. By advocating for more modernity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the renewalists were inadvertently challenging Safavid traditions, which were rooted in pre-Islamic patriarchal systems. The renewal movement adopted the plight of women early on looking to return to sensibilities which predated Safavid rule and the imposition of orthodox Shi’a Islam interpretations.<sup>20</sup> They viewed the “traditionalist” Iranian woman as someone who was trapped by tyranny and superstition. She was the poorest of women and a burden to her husband.

During this period, Iranian intellectuals focused on modern Enlightenment ideals, bringing attention to what they thought of as a corrupted moral environment which was infecting Iranian women. Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani saw them, “as he did all of Iranian society—as victims of a social and political environment that deprived them of their natural and, implicitly, virtuous national attributes.”<sup>21</sup> He identified conventions attributable to Twelver Shi’ism, such as the practice of temporary marriages, as exacerbators to the problem of polygyny which he identified as a barbaric Arabic custom. The writings of intellectuals like Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh and Kermani helped renewalists promote modernization bringing the plight of

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<sup>19</sup> Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

women into public discourses. These would contribute to the Constitutional Revolution, which saw the creation of the Constitution of 1906, the establishment of the Parliament, and the re-institution of both in 1909 after a brief period during which they had been abolished.

The reinstatement of the Constitution in 1909 helped to open the way for fundamental change touting thoughts of modernity, which were influenced by Western ideals such as democracy, justice, equality and independence. “The movement created a conceptual link between national independence and progress and women’s emancipation. It constructed women as social actors for the first time and facilitated the formation of a network of women’s rights activists which gradually developed into a loosely formed women’s movement.”<sup>22</sup> The movement sought to improve women’s positions by demanding education and changes to the policies of seclusion and early marriage. The creation of the measures during the push for modernity inevitably tied feminist ideals to national development.

Islam, of course, was ever present. The *ulama*, or Muslim scholars, debated feminist challenges, pointing out the secular discourse associated with the push for modernity where Islam was relegated to a traditionalist backward practice. The more orthodox Muslim clergy fought against the removal of the veil and the building of schools for women. Although some supported the Constitution and allowed their daughters to attend the schools, others incited mobs to attack them.<sup>23</sup> Feminism in Iran going forward would, in part, be constructed within the framework of competing Islamic interpretations.

The role of women in Iranian society was well established by December 1925, the year

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<sup>22</sup> Parvin Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran,” in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



Reza Pahlavi was appointed as the legal monarch, the Shah, by the Iranian Assembly. People were weary of the impotence of the previous constitutional government which was influenced by European powers via threats and interventions. The Constitution had eliminated the authority of the Crown, but the coup and subsequent power grab reinvigorated the dictatorial position. Reza Shah established a strong central state, centered around a strong military, with an affinity toward intellectual modernism. His approach, “ended an era of women’s independent activities by creating a state-sponsored women’s organization to lead the way on women’s emancipation.”<sup>24</sup> He co-opted the previous women’s movements by delivering many of the initiatives that feminists sought, including compulsory unveiling, free education and job opportunities and establishing a state-led organization, in its place. Women’s voices were silenced as the various groups of women, including independent socialists, liberal nationalists, and feminists, were muted by the only voice speaking on behalf of their rights, the state.<sup>25</sup>

Reza Shah’s regime wanted to address the woman question to establish political legitimacy because it would illustrate their success in a political arena where the Qajar had failed. His establishment of the Women’s Awakening project in 1936 sought to offer new opportunities for some women to get an education and access to positions in the workforce, in exchange for the unveiling of all Iranian women in public, part of what he thought was necessary for the creation of a modern state.<sup>26</sup> His vision included a future where women were no longer just domestic counterparts for men, but where women acted as colleagues in public spaces,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>25</sup> Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran,” 55.

<sup>26</sup> Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 1.

“chaperoned by her male guardian.”<sup>27</sup>

In Iran, Reza Shah’s vision for women was announced to a group of teachers and female students on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1936, also known as “the day of shame.” He stated that women would now be free to enjoy other advantages of society, in addition to the task of motherhood. The Shah had abolished the veil. “Women were urged to go to universities, become teachers, join the expanding ministries, that is to participate in the building of a newly forming state bureaucracy, rather than become part of the labour force in factories.”<sup>28</sup> However, while the Shah was opening schools for girls and encouraged higher education for women, all independent women’s societies and journals were closed.

The veil was a central component to Reza Shah’s program and later, thanks to their seizure of political discourse, to the Islamic State. Reza Shah believed banning the veil was an example of modernization from above. He saw the practice of veiling as a backwardness that was holding back Iran in the world. By tying women’s issues to the legitimacy of the state, hoping to build its power, Reza Shah confirmed the traditions of patriarchy with the assertion that male guardianship was necessary for women’s arrival into the public political space. He attempted to use women’s issues as a tool to break civil law away from *Shari’a* law, so that Iran could have an opportunity to join the modern world. Ultimately, the coopting of the women’s movement and the fact that the project only helped a small number of women while alienating others, leading to backlash from some, marked the effort as a failure.<sup>29</sup>

The transition for most women in Iran was a difficult one. Unveiling went against their

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran,” in *Women, Islam & the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 14.

religious values and made women the target of attacks from religious zealots. The Shah maintained that he was freeing women by forcing them to remove the veil. The Women's Awakening project of 1936 succeeded in introducing women's gender equality issues into political discourse. Previously, women's issues focused mainly on equity in private spaces, but unveiling and offering women opportunities for education and placement in the workforce opened dialogue about women's equality in public spaces.<sup>30</sup>

Reza Shah suppressed political opposition and tied his movement to the liberal model of Western society. He sought to secularize government and avoided overt criticism of Islam to quell the opposition. The push for secular nationalism was helped by the rise of socialism across the border in the Soviet Union. The uniformity of the newly formed conscripted military unified the previous grouping of ragtag tribes and groups. Similarly, he hoped to refashion the nation as one Iranian body politic, where the "citizen-soldiers were the instruments of reconstruction, for which he was its mind."<sup>31</sup>

The son of Reza Shah took over the throne in 1941. Mohammad Reza Shah continued to pursue the same policies as his father. These early years provided women with more access to education and introduced them to political activism. Ten years into his rule there was a short lived liberal nationalist government which took over temporarily and would prove to be very influential in creating feminist space for women in the future, but certainly not in the ways that the West would have intended. A coup led by the British and the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States restored the Shah to the throne in 1953.

Iranian intellectuals theorized that women should shun the veil, but, "not enter the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 249.

public sphere on politics, the judiciary, or the civil service.”<sup>32</sup> They attacked superstition and irrationality, as well as, poetry, saying it contributed to an avoidance of thought. They set up boundaries to women’s rights, stating that women could, “participate through their political support of national and necessarily male agendas.”<sup>33</sup> They sought a modernity, devoid of capitalist commodification that worked through a framework of Islamic teachings and ideals. As they joined other marginalized groups, they condemned the monarchy for being modern but not democratic, authoritarian but not within the confines of Islamic law, but also for promoting “westoxicated” images of women, instead of “authenticating a secular concept of womanhood.”<sup>34</sup> Like Reza Shah, the opposition learned to co-opt ideas, even if fundamentally, they seemed at odds with the application of putting those ideological ideals into practice in reality.

Women were permitted to seek employment in state bureaucracy and some public arenas were open to women’s participation. The expansion of participation for women grew to include elements of social, economic, and educational life, but the reforms were mostly cosmetic. The economic and social changes worked to intensify women’s oppression. Women were expected to be modern-yet-modest. There was a concern over the moral corruption of women and the commoditization of women’s sexuality, a perpetual trope which continued to be echoed by religious leaders in Iran.

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<sup>31</sup> Najmabadi, “Hazards of Modernity and Morality,” 53.

<sup>32</sup> Zohreh T. Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, edited by Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 222.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

Major shifts occurred during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Mohammad Reza Shah positioned himself as a despotic leader who was the "Great Benefactor" of his people, instead of a monarch who worked with citizens to build up the state.<sup>35</sup> Secular political organizations fell by the wayside and the Islamic clergy emerged as a political force. Important Muslim intellectuals shifted the views on women. "With the demise of secular politics, discourses on women within opposition politics became progressively moralized, and eventually Islamicised."<sup>36</sup> "Instead, women were urged to embrace the new Shi'i model of womanhood which represented 'authenticity' and 'independence' and emphasized women's dual role as mothers and revolutionaries."<sup>37</sup> Any progress of women's rights became gifts from the Shah, adding to the glory of the state.

Islamist feminism, or gender activism constructed within an Islamic framework, joined other feminist groups to work for women's equality. "Iranian feminism was essentially secular until the rise of Shi'i modernism in the 1970s."<sup>38</sup> The work of the Women's Organization of Iran was not permitted to claim responsibility for any progress. Instead, any reforms were due to the benevolence of the Shah. The state system became the most important obstacle to success for women during this period. This left women to position themselves in the chimeric space between the efforts of the Shah's progressive modernity and Islamic morality.<sup>39</sup>

In 1967, Iran opened a network of family planning clinics with the intention of

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<sup>35</sup> Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality," 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Paidar, "Feminism and Islam in Iran," 57.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Homa Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Report*, No. 190 Gender, Population, Environment (September-October 1994): 12.

controlling and reducing the population growth rate. Abortion was legalized in 1973, with the permission of the husband, during the first trimester. Contraceptives were made available including surgical procedures such as tubal ligations and vasectomies. There was high demand for these benefits in highly populated urban areas where middle class families lived, however, “there was little effort to extend family planning to the rural population, though nationally an estimated 11 percent of women of child-bearing age used some form of contraceptive.”<sup>40</sup>

Some efforts to enforce women’s literacy and education lead to contradictions of progress. In a telling example, centers were set up to train rural village girls to become agents of development. Rural areas had clung more fiercely to their Islamic customs. They found it culturally shocking trying to acclimate to western culture. When the girls slept in bunk beds, in their dorms, they would fall out of them. So, in an effort to help them, they were tied to their bunks by their veils, “bound to her bed with the veil in the larger cause of progressive rights and freedoms, a paradox of modernity, captures the simultaneity of modernity and its underside of the forces of reason and their bondage, of the necessary reconstruction of identity and the loss of community; it bears witness to modernity as its own grave digger.”<sup>41</sup> While this example may not have been typical, it provided fodder for those who opposed Western ideals. This type of modernity did not offer freedom from the perspective of Islamic adherents. It acted as a forced Imperial bondage as it attempted to provide access to a wider variety of freedoms.

These efforts of modernization also produced other unintended consequences. The very presence of these modern women in the rural villages, the cornerstone of orthodox Islamic traditions, led to reactionary violence against the women. Men found it appalling that women

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” 224.

would come knocking at the door, only to ask for the *women* in the home, instead of asking to speak to the ‘man of the house.’ The Mohammad Reza Shah’s programs of “modernization, rapid industrialization, and westernization” resulted in poverty and chaos as people moved from rural to urban areas. Unfortunately, reactionary violence against rural women continued to be a consequence of modernity, hereafter. While modernity was able to codify people’s public lives, familial law, especially within the confines of the home, remained Islamic.<sup>42</sup>

### **WOMEN’S VOICES DURING THE TRANSITION 1967-1979**

In 2008, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani interviewed Mahnaz Afkhami about the years surrounding the Revolution and her work with the women’s movement during those years. Ms. Afkhami was appointed, Minister for Women’s Affairs in 1976 and served as the Secretary General of the Women’s Organization of Iran (WOI) from 1970 until 1978. During the interview she said, Iranian laws were rooted in patriarchal ideas sustaining traditional roles of men and women within the family. The man was the leader who owned his women and children. Because of this, the WOI sought to reform the laws in pursuit of the rights of women. The group worked with the Majles, Iran’s Parliament, to create laws which would enhance the interests of women in the family. Ultimately, the Family Protection Laws of 1967 and the revision of 1975 established more equality pertaining to issues like minimum marriage ages, divorce, child custody, child support payments, polygamy, and temporary marriages, among other rights. Afkhami conveyed the words of Ms. Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi, a member of the Iranian Parliament during the discussions which led to the 1967 law which illustrated the persistent efforts made by women to fight for their own rights. “She said it took three years of sustained activity and lobbying, including study, research, and exchange of ideas and debate with legal experts, judges, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 225.

female and male attorneys to prepare the draft and have it submitted to the Majles by 15 deputies as the rules required.”<sup>43</sup> Even with this kind of preparation, the bill initially met opposition from those concerned about any conflict with familial Islamic law, but after consulting with legal experts and progressive members of the clergy, through an arduous process, the bill was passed. This kind of extraordinary effort, whether big or small, public or private, overt or inconspicuous, came to typify the determination required by women to carve out spaces for their voices to be heard.

The Family Protection Acts of 1967 and 1975 were landmark moments for women’s rights in Iran. The monarchy issued the ultimately short-lived efforts, more concerned with impressing and seeking membership in a modern world, than by responding to the needs of women; however, their successes were important milestones. They further established women as political actors. Special courts were set up for family matters. This established a precedent for the Special Civil Courts which would handle family law, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The Acts moved family matters in the lives of women in a more progressive direction in the areas of marriage, divorce, and child custody. The minimum age for women to be married was raised from 9 to 15 in 1967 and then to 18 in 1975. The Acts also outlined specific circumstances when women would be granted divorces. Before their institution, only men had the ability to seek divorces. Circumstances included incurable diseases, addiction, impotence or infertility, mistreatment (with witness testimony), and the inability of the husband to provide for his wife. Mothers were able to gain custody of the children after a divorce if the courts determined that it was best for the children. The Acts also established that in either case, the father would be responsible for the financial maintenance of the child. The 1975 Act also

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<sup>43</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, Foundation For Iranian Studies, September 27, 2008.



restricted the number of polygamous marriages a man could seek to one and only with permission from the courts and the consent of the first wife. Also, wives were granted the right to a divorce, should the husband obtain a second wife.<sup>44</sup>

Afkhami continued to reveal other obstacles to the passing of the bill. While it was being debated, another women's reforms bill sponsored by a female Senator got leaked to the newspapers. It was a more progressive bill which created a frenzy in the press. It focused on the most sensational aspects of the alternate bill, igniting widespread debate across the country. Ultimately, it forced some of the aspects out of the WOI sponsored bill to be tabled. "Some of the members of the clergy even spoke of denouncing Senator Manouchehrian as a heretic causing her to leave Tehran until the publicity, and the possible threat to her safety, subsided."<sup>45</sup> Polygamy and child custody reforms were postponed for 8 years as a result of the uproar. Not only were women's efforts targeted by those who sought to keep the patriarchal agenda intact, but so were their physical bodies, as well as their immortal souls.

Afkhami followed up her own thoughts by wondering, "Whether it is useful to attempt reforms that have a good chance to succeed and thus to improve women's lives as much as possible or is it preferable to wait until the ideal becomes realizable?"<sup>46</sup> Answering her own question she posited, every society has a variation of groups with wide-ranging sets of thought and beliefs. The way forward for women's issues was to be succinct with the issue, disperse the knowledge broadly, engage large swaths of people and encourage them to persistently participate in the political exchanges, so long as they stayed on message. She recognized that the vehement

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<sup>44</sup> The Family Protection Act (1975), The Foundation for Iranian Studies, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://fisis-iran.org/en/women/laws/family>.

<sup>45</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

opposition from the conservative clerics was only due in part to their religious concerns. Instead she believed their continued involvement in familial matters yielded influence and substantive benefits.

The work of the WOI in the 1970's made them targets. Any efforts made to advance the betterment of women's lives was met with hostility as opponents enjoined their work with the Shah's modernity agenda. Women's reforms became a symbol of the Shah's counterfeit Iranian image. Still, women had a lot of encouraging results. "The services offered at the WOI's Welfare Centers served as a good vehicle for mobilizing large numbers of women, because it legitimized their leaving their homes and participating in group activities, which had a tangible impact on the lives of families."<sup>47</sup> They increased women's awareness of legal issues and were the first Middle Eastern organization to research how to eliminate honor killings, creating a model for reforming laws which would be used in other countries. They developed a World Plan of Action which was ratified during the United Nations' First International Conference on Women in Mexico, in 1975. And, they learned from their mistakes. Afkhami recounted a blunder which led to the resignation of Senator Manouchehrian. During their work on the passport law, which strove to change the requirement for women traveling abroad to have to seek the permission of their husbands first, Afkhami wrote an open letter to the President of the Senate, expressing her opposition. It was printed on the front page of the newspapers, marring their efforts to change the law. It was an important lesson to learn in the fight for women's rights. Consequently, when they, "decided to disseminate the news of legalization of abortion – which made abortion legal by eliminating punitive measures against physicians performing the procedure – quietly and through internal

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

memos disseminated by the Ministry of Health and the WOI.”<sup>48</sup>

Some conservative Iranians felt, especially those opposed to the Shah, modernity was being forced down their throats without regard to the texts guiding their lives. The WOI continued their efforts organizing women’s events and studies which sought to reform gender bias, prejudicial images and the role of women in film, media, and textbooks. But, Afkhami revealed that their efforts resulted in a populace that did not know how to communicate their stances with each other. “We created conditions in which the contradictions related to modernity, progress, equality, and human rights, especially women’s rights, increased and the reaction to our work put perhaps too much pressure on the country’s social fabric.”<sup>49</sup>

Iranians began to feel that the Shah was only serving his own best interests. Movements to reclaim Iranian heritage and culture sprang up across the country. The protesters, spurred on by Islamic voices, rejected Western capitalist influences. To meet and converse in private, away from the prying eyes of the Shah’s secret police, many sought the safety of mosques. “Numerous women involved in this movement began to don *hejab* in an effort to reclaim their Iranian and Islamic heritage by covering their bodies to hide them from the outside gaze.”<sup>50</sup>

They created a movement which continued to pursue modernity, but not one based on the Western capitalist model. They aligned with the marginalized under the Shah’s regime and were thus influenced by Islamic voices. This led to the pursuit of a modernity which worked within the Islamic framework. Coupled with the 1936 decree banning the veil, it seemed as if the Iranian people were living under an oppressive regime who hypocritically promoted progress and freedom but did not allow people to choose.

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<sup>48</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

One of the other women who came to work with Afkhami was Australian Elizabeth Reid. In 1988, the Foundation for Iranian Studies conducted interviews, so it was at this time that Ms. Afkhami had the opportunity to interview Ms. Reid about her work for women's rights in Iran during the pre-Revolution years. Reid recounted how during the 1978 anniversary of lifting the veil she attended a ceremony where she was a guest speaker. The event took place only days after the Ayatollahs issued a directive forbidding Iranian women from appearing on stage without a veil. Ms. Reid saw women who lived their entire lives without a veil, don one for the event. She witnessed first-hand, the beginning of the religious attacks on women. She attributes the exertion of brutal force to the need for religious people to halt the progress of women rights in society. It was this event which marked the start of the revolution for her.<sup>51</sup>

In the previous years, Reid noted, women started to demand their rights which proved to be too much when coupled with the other changes happening in Iran, the rural migration to the cities, the soaring price of food, inadequate services, and the fees associated with education and hospital services. According to Reid, complaints about these changes from the religious *ulama* forced the revolution to happen. It began with legitimate complaints aired in the Mosques, where anger and discontent would get "whipped up" and directed at the Shah.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, women were moving out of rural areas, leaving rural men with fewer options, resulting in discontent. Reid stated, "We were in the southern most UN project and the most vulnerable because we were all women, we'd been directly associated with the Shah's family, with Ashraf, while we were in

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<sup>50</sup> Pardis Mahdavi. *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Reid, interview by Mahnaz Afkhami, Foundation For Iranian Studies, Oakland, New Zealand, April 14, 1988.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

the Women's Organization."<sup>53</sup> The aggression against women, fueled by their recent progress and the disruption of traditional patriarchal life, confronted Reid in September of that year.

Reid lived in a house with another Australian diplomat. One day people started to gather around their back gate, while she was alone in the house. They directed her to put on her chador and come down to speak with them in the street. Reid described what happened next as a "kangaroo court." Accused of being prostitutes because the previous night some male friends had come over for a meal and danced to music after dinner in their own home. As the accusations intensified, men began to surround her. She feared for her life as they yelled at her in Farsi. "They got nastier and nastier and eventually they said if I didn't either convert to Islam and come with them to the Mosque five times a day, or leave the country by Moharram I would be murdered, I would be dead."<sup>54</sup> Eventually, as the women who were chanting at the back of the group fixed her chador, because she was wearing it incorrectly, she managed to move them toward her back gate, so that she could re-enter her house. She continued to live in fear until the UN finally pulled out of the country, which was delayed due to the UN not wanting to send a message of no confidence in the Shah. Before leaving, Reid saw women who previously were living independently and reading poetry, revert to wearing the veil. An informal project was started to discuss with these women what was behind the conversion. Reid told Afkhami in the interview, "Every one of those women reported that she'd had a dream and in that dream she had been told to revert to the veil."<sup>55</sup> The only variation was whether the women had been visited by Khomeini or Allah. This seemed to mark the beginning of the efforts by women during the Revolution to try and survive. Women did what they needed to do, so that they could continue to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

create spaces in the future.

Looking back at the aftermath of the Revolution, Mahnaz Afkhami retrospectively commented about the vitriol regarding the Shah. They felt that any accomplishment he made was a bad one, what little they attributed to him. She followed, “The effect of this approach is that it makes us see the ability to discern and make decisions, somewhere other than in women themselves and, as a result, we deny women’s agency, and render ourselves helpless and weak. Not only is this in conflict with reality, but it is also damaging to the women’s movement.”<sup>56</sup> She believed in the universality of feminism and its ability to find spaces for women’s voices in the framework of any religious doctrine.

#### **THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI**

Ironically, it was the *chador*, banned by Reza Shah as a symbol of women’s freedom and modernization, that was later used as a symbol by women who marched against Mohammad Reza Shah’s regime in protest, due to their adopted belief that women’s sexuality was being commodified by the monarchy and the removal of choice for women acted as a despotic imposition. As the Iranian Revolution of 1979 got underway, some women who were able to walk around in public without a veil for over 40 years, decided to use the veil as a symbol of opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy. The practice indicated the lasciviousness of Western modernity where female bodies were commodified. To the Islamic feminists, “True Islam, transcended the ‘traditional, deviatory and colonized Islam’ in relation to women. The failures of traditional Islam were seen as rooted in male-dominated culture and distorted interpretations of

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Reid, interview by Mahnaz Afkhami.

<sup>56</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani.

Islamic laws.”<sup>57</sup> Women hoped the new Islamic regime headed by Ayatollah Khomeini would create a dress code that was not targeted at a specific gender, but instead, simply required non-arousing and modest body coverings for everyone. Women were under the impression that they would be major contributors to the Islamic Republic’s policies regarding gender, but that did not happen.

Instead, Khomeini ignored moderate voices and created hard line changes which altered life for women in Iran. Genders were segregated in public places such as trains and schools. The veil was compulsorily reintroduced. Changes to the political sphere were accompanied by the closure of women’s centers and the decline of women’s contributions to the economy. Khomeini, who praised women as “pillars of Iranian society” promoted the submission of women where the chador became, “a shroud of protective exclusion and bondage.” When thirty thousand women marched on the streets to protest the compulsory veiling, it was done so by a diverse representative group of women, but it led to fanatical responses of violence against women which, “revealed to them the indifference of leftist organization to women’s issues.”<sup>58</sup> Islamist feminists argued against the mandate because they felt the old male dominated view of Islam was distorted. True Islam, they countered, should transcend antiquated traditions creating a more egalitarian position for women. “They proposed that the Islamic dress code should not be made specific to women but that both men and women should be required to wear simple and decent clothing which covers the body in a non-arousing, modest fashion.”<sup>59</sup> Khomeini balked at any hint of moderation, clamping down on the Islamist women’s movement, nearly silencing them

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<sup>57</sup> Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran,” 60.

<sup>58</sup> Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” 232.

<sup>59</sup> Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran,” 60.

for the duration of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>60</sup>

The Islamic Constitution of the new Republic touted women's rights in its introduction. It mentioned the continued active and massive presence in their struggle and stated that men and women were equal before the law. "Through the creation of Islamic social infrastructures, all the elements of humanity that hitherto served the multifaceted foreign exploitation shall regain their true identity and human rights."<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, many areas of law, especially the family law exposed differential treatments, values, and penalties.<sup>62</sup> The Iranian Civil Code of 1982 lowered the legal age of maturity for girls and therefore marriage to 9.<sup>63</sup> It stated in article 1041 that Marriage before the age, of majority was prohibited.<sup>64</sup> It defined the age of majority in article 1210, note 1: "the age of majority for boys is fifteen lunar years and for girls nine lunar years."<sup>65</sup>

The veil did not protect women who had lost their honor during the Pahlavi years. It negated female sexuality and removed male culpability for their supposedly uncontrollable impulses. "Many women who wore the veil as a protest symbol did not expect hijab (veiling) to become mandatory."<sup>66</sup> Islamic punishments became codified into law. Violations of wearing the veil earned lashings, adulterers were stoned, and thieves had their hands amputated. Bright colors were banned and things like smiling, laughing out loud, and dancing became contested by the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Constitution Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (rev. 1989), Preamble, *constituteproject.org*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 100.

<sup>63</sup> Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires," 15.

<sup>64</sup> Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1982), Book 7 – On Marriage and Divorce, Ch. 1 – On Marriage, Sec. 1 – On Asking for the Hand in Marriage, Article 1041.

<sup>65</sup> Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1982), Book 10 – Regarding Guardianship and Tutorship, Ch. 1 – On General Consideration, Article 1210, note 1.



Revolutionary Committees, arresting people even out of their homes.<sup>67</sup>

Before the Revolution, women were free from the veil with access to education, but continued to be relegated to a domestic space, even after they had earned more expansive employment opportunities. Afterward, they saw all their efforts erased by the new regime. From the Islamic perspective, women were forced to continue exposing their bodies as part of the exploitative commodifying modernity imposed by the Western-loving monarchical regime. “The Constitution attempted to create harmony between the Islamic family and nation by advocating a set of patriarchal relations to strengthen male control over women in the family on the one hand, and granting women the right to be active citizens on the other.”<sup>68</sup> Women of the rural lower class were trapped identifying with male power and privilege that belonged to their fathers “within a sexual system that trafficked in women.”<sup>69</sup>

After Khomeini rose to power, he annulled the family code. This took away the restrictions on men’s right to polygamous marriages and narrowed the ability for women to file for divorce. Temporary marriage was made legal once more, although it continued to be practiced in more traditional rural social groups. Temporary marriages were just like they sounded. They allowed people to get married with a sanction from the Islamic leaders, thus approved by God and State, for a shortened period ranging from 1 minute up to 99 years. It was an agreement where the man could be already married, but the woman had to be single. It amounted to a way to have a legal and sanctified sexual encounter. While it was frowned upon, it

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<sup>66</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, “Iran and the Women’s Question,” *Atlantic Council*, February 4, 2019, <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-and-the-women-s-question/>.

<sup>68</sup> Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran,” 58.

<sup>69</sup> Sullivan, “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” 231.

was officially respectable because the Mullah issued the certificates. The certificates allowed young adults to go on vacation with the opposite sex and share a hotel room without any scandal. It could also be issued to opposite sex people who wanted to live together but who were not really committed to marriage. Of course, it was also given to married men so that they could keep concubines. Wives rarely knew about them, but this way, men were not officially being unfaithful.

During this period women sought an ambiguous chimeric feminine space which rejected the Western capitalistic impositions on their bodies, continued to benefit from progressive secular modernity, pursued a cultural Iranian identity, and freed them from pre-Islamic patriarchal customs, while working within the framework of an Islamic fundamentalist interpretation of the holy texts. They worked to dig themselves out from the rubble and reclaim a space found between secular Persian nationalism and Islamic law. Women had been used as a symbol of progressive modernity for the Shah. Now they found themselves being touted as the mothers of the nation, relegated to the domestic space and regulated out of the public political spaces they had enjoyed.

Following the Revolution, Farzaneh Milani observed, “women dominate the cultural imaginary by becoming emblems of national identity: “Forcefully unveiled, they personify the modernization of the nation. Compulsorily veiled, they embody the reinstatement of the Islamic Order.”<sup>70</sup> The state reinstated the Civil Code of 1936 and established many measures with the intent of protecting the Islamic family unit and de-sexualizing gender interactions in order to save citizens from the temptation of moral consequences. The Islamic state hoped to harness the power and activist capacity of the women’s movement and proceeded to hijack its mobilization

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<sup>70</sup> Sullivan. “Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran,” 228.

potential just as the monarchy did in the 1970's. By encouraging the development of the Islamic women's movement, they hoped to counter the interests of secular feminism, a group which they had partnered with for the last decade. The Islamic Republic of Iran was successful in its divisive tactic and forced secular feminists into hiding or out of the country.<sup>71</sup>

Women were important symbols during the revolution, and many had participated proudly. After the creation of the Islamic Republic, many women were disappointed and felt marginalized. They fled the country *en masse* as the Islamic state held mass arrests and executions. They stood together protesting a despotic monarchical regime who had strong-armed and killed several hundred people during its 50 years in power only to sweep in a new regime that managed to jail and kill thousands of political opponents in the first few years.

When this kind of continued contestation exists, between modern Enlightenment ideals of equality and the framework of an Islamic polity, regimes resort to increased hegemonic controls in all public political spaces. Historically, the modern state of Iran has viewed political opponents as "enemies of the state," regardless of which regime was in power. Iran used coercive economic bureaucracy as a tool to shape political spaces. They participated in massive developmental projects to temper civil society while modernizing their country. By withholding public political spaces from opponents, they inadvertently shoved oppositional discourse into private spaces. This allowed any resistance to become part of a hidden dialogue which could be constructed into mass demonstrations before being discovered.<sup>72</sup> Other subtle forms of resistance could also be implemented in these private spaces such as less modest

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<sup>71</sup> Paidar, "Feminism and Islam in Iran," 59.

<sup>72</sup> Majid Sharifi, *Imagining Iran: The Tragedy of Subaltern Nationalism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 315.

clothing which ignored the impositions from the state. One other pitfall which arose from the removal of opposition from public spaces was the location of political debate. By moving all political debate into private spaces, the opposition was able to manufacture conspiracy theories, falsehoods, and sensationalist claims, at will, to subvert the authority of the state. There was no way to distinguish fact from fiction.<sup>73</sup>

Following the Revolution, religious scholars held a key place in Iran. The religious class became the ruling class and went from an opposition group to the dominant group in the political sphere. They created a new Constitution and formed a rarely seen democratic Islamic Republic. After fighting for years to establish the Family Protection Law of 1975, secular feminists saw it destroyed in the amount of time it took Khomeini to give one speech. “Khomeini asks women to recognize and accept that it is necessary that there be limitations on women’s individual freedoms; that although women may vote, be elected, and choose professions, those things must be done within the framework of Islam.”<sup>74</sup> Khomeini held up the Islamic Republic’s provision of women’s right to own property as an indication of their economic independence, however he also saw this freedom as the origin of the unraveling of the institution of the family. It was responsible for the immorality which was permeating society, the minimization of male gender roles, and the absence of love. Women were characterized as tempests of promiscuity, untamed beasts of lasciviousness capable of corrupting men, requiring the control and regulation of their behavior and bodies.<sup>75</sup>

Life in rural villages was no better. “Women stay home more as public space has become

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<sup>73</sup> Sharifi, *Imagining Iran*, 317.

<sup>74</sup> Adele K. Ferdows, “Women and the Islamic Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (1983): 291, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/162994>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

male space, even in the village. Less visible than ever before, women in Iran seem to be mere shadows behind their dark veils.”<sup>76</sup> The continuation of women’s education was promoted enabling large percentages of women, an even larger percentage than men, to attend university. Unfortunately, the state did not pursue active policies when it came to women’s employment. Instead, women were encouraged to attend schools because they continued to be the mothers of young boys who would eventually be men. Without enough education, mothers would not know enough to properly raise them and be able to teach them in the household. It was male sons after all, who would provide for them in old age.

During Khomeini’s reign as Supreme Leader, the period of Islamization, or societal shift toward Islam, Iran was bogged down in a war with Iraq. Women were asked to compensate for the loss of men to the armed forces. Islamist women’s groups were silenced during the war, but by the end of the decade, women’s dissent manifested in something termed “the politics of nagging.” Women commented on daily life and the hardships women faced during the war and even about the war itself, instigating a noticeable shift in public opinion.<sup>77</sup> Women were asked to produce manpower for the war, by being mothers. They inadvertently initiated the creation of public space by leaving the home to shop and tend to the issues of raising their families without their husbands present. Some were even asked to enter the workforce, earning missing wages that helped their families to survive. As the war ended, women were forced back into domestic spaces, but they chided the government and embraced the vital role which they occupied during

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<sup>76</sup> Erika Friedl, *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village* (New York: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010), 100.

the war years.<sup>78</sup>

The economic hardship of the war had given women a public presence. After the war with Iraq, tens of thousands of women went on to volunteer with organizations outside the home.

“One impressive example of voluntarism was the Ministry of Health’s mobilization of some 25,000 women in Tehran in the early 1990s to educate urban lower-class families about hygiene and birth control; mounting population growth (3.9 percent between 1980 and 1985 and 3.4 percent between 1985 and 1990) had caused the regime great political anxiety, and these women contributed to decreasing the rate to a low of 1.7 percent between 1990 and 1995.”<sup>79</sup>

Women resisted by continuing to make their public presences felt. They resisted patiently, wearing their head covering incorrectly, sparking battles and confrontations with morality police. Some women received warnings; others were arrested. Women, “insisted on exerting individual choice and entitlement, which challenged both the egalitarian claims of the Islamic state and the premises of orthodox Islam.”<sup>80</sup> Women found new ways to redefine their volunteer roles as Health Workers. They acted as partners to the Ministry of Health to passively inject their presence into other areas of the public sphere.<sup>81</sup> As they infiltrated the neighborhoods, they introduced many subtle changes in their communities. They transformed familial traditional structures and embodied and exemplified life as an equal partner to their husbands, instead of a subservient wife. “In short, these women view their volunteer health work as an avenue of public participation and reinterpretation, if not subversion, of the regime’s gender ideology.”<sup>82</sup> The Ministry was not able to keep their volunteerism apolitical because ‘women’s rights are human

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<sup>78</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 102.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>81</sup> Homa Hoodfar, “Health as a Context for Social and Gender Activism: Female Volunteer Health Workers in Iran,” *Population and Development Review* Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2010): 507, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25749197>.

rights', so whenever women are involved, they are consequently political agents. The transformation of the community familial units was due the failure of the Ministry of Health to recognize women as human when they implemented these health programs.

Islamic women, as devout as ever, began to ask questions. Women had been mothers to the nation and after the war ended, it became apparent that the restrictions placed on them were not equal nor equitable. They had a lot of what seemed to be individual mundane issues, but in totality, they were an avalanche of demands which caused retribution from the Republic. "In the end, the rather abstract philosophical approach of Islamist women proved insufficient to accommodate women's desire for individual choice within an Islamist framework."<sup>83</sup>

Different groups using various realities to incorporate change all claimed true Islam in their interpretations of the texts. Each group he explained was made up of a population of Muslims on a continuum of belief. Islam could never be monolithic due to varied perceptions, practices, and interpretations. Orthodox Islam's authoritarian view imposed patriarchal power where God had usurped the agency of people. Sociologist Asef Bayat explained that Islam was no longer seen as just a religion by the West. It was identified as a political entity which constructed democracy as a foreign idea which diminished the will of God to deliver popular power.<sup>84</sup> Other Islamists constructed democracy as a component already within Islam. "Rashid al-Ghanoushi, for instance suggested that "Islamic rule is by nature democratic." The Quranic notion of *Shura* (consultation) revealed the equality of race and gender in Islam.<sup>85</sup> Women's

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>83</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 103.

<sup>84</sup> Bayat, "Islam and Democracy What is the Real Question?," 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 8.

groups needed to find liberal reinterpretations of religious texts by legitimate authorities that were compatible with democratic ideals. Women sought religious scholars and even doctors to include acceptable male voices in the political sphere. Many times, it was the men who delivered the final queries to the members of the Majles, to bring about change. Women understood that insisting on direct female confrontation in many instances would not help their cause. Their voices were best heard when they could create energy in a popular movement, supported by the majority. This method of remaining in the background while men made their voices heard is another example of a subtle and passive, but conscious resistance used by women to serve the bigger picture in the struggle for equal rights.

It was not enough for women to find new interpretations to further their cause. They needed to find interpretations that could be made valid by those who resided in the system and could imbue the reading with power, such as the clerics. For women's purposes, it was the clerics who mediated between "the word and the world."<sup>86</sup> The reason this was effective was that Islam was not a social movement, it wanted to create a society that was fundamentally Islamic, where the good of Islam could infiltrate and trickle down onto everyone. By instigating change from the top down through the implementation of law based on new valid interpretation, women's groups were able to assist all of society, including the poor.<sup>87</sup>

### **POST ISLAMIST FEMINISM**

The change from Islamist feminism to Post-Islamist feminism in the mid-90's was characterized by a shift in the analysis of the women's movement in Iran. Over time Post-

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<sup>86</sup> Bayat, "Islam and Democracy What is the Real Question?," 14.

<sup>87</sup> Bayat, *Ibid.*, 16.



Islamist feminism became identified as both a political and social condition, and a project.<sup>88</sup> Feminists, took up the challenge of accommodating women's desire for individual choice housed within an Islamic framework. They sought to reinterpret Islam through a more inclusive feminist lens. The goal was to broaden their ability to achieve women's equality by building a coalition of feminisms, regardless of their origins or ties to Islamic or secular thought. Their new position identified the imperfection of patriarchal systems but, recognized the positive components of them as well. The West was still viewed by many as immoral and guilty of commodifying women's bodies, but it also had democracy and science. The inclusivity allowed feminist activists to identify as women, instead of Islamic or secular women, to articulate their membership in the global fight for women's rights.<sup>89</sup> They were able to point their fingers at political and patriarchal perceptions as vectors for gender inequalities that were rooted in issues of power. Women interpreters moved past literal meanings and instead embraced, "interpretive and historical deductions."<sup>90</sup>

Thus, Post Islamist feminism was an attempt to fuse Islamic and secular ideals, understanding that neither democracy nor Islam were monolithic. "It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past."<sup>91</sup> It was an effort by women to obtain rights by separating religion from state politics, while maintaining religious dispositions. To uncover new interpretations, women turned

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<sup>88</sup> Bayat, *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 104.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>91</sup> Bayat, "Islam and Democracy What is the Real Question?," 19.

to linguistics to deconstruct the original intent of the texts.

Issues were rooted in *fiqh*, or the human understanding of the divine Islamic law as revealed in the Quran. In classical *fiqh* the distinctions for male and female, for instance, were not the same as the biological sex taxonomies recognized today. Likewise, *jins*, which was also contemporarily used to describe male and female, meant genus. For the Islamic scholar, “the insistence on these definitional distinctions enables him to argue against those scholars who oppose sex change on the basis of opposition to changing God’s work of creation. He argues that change of male to female and vice versa is not a change in the genus of a created being; it is a change in his/her *jinsi* apparatus.”<sup>92</sup>

Science found the cause of a statement. *Fiqh* did not care about the cause. It only wanted to ensure that the rules were being followed, which meant it resided within the bounds of the framework of Islamic thought and was therefore a valid reinterpretation of the texts.<sup>93</sup> *Jins* had roots in Persian and had an affiliation with “sex” but was not identical, especially when trying to define it in English. The effect of America’s scientific discourses illustrated the pervasiveness of English on the scientific status of a word, based on the place and time when American scientists put the word into usage, without acknowledging or even understanding the depth of the etymology of that word.

Gender concerns were often revealed as women’s concerns. Considering the domination of the patriarchal system in familial life due to tradition, Islamic practices, and gendered nationalism, forms of women’s resistance disclosed themselves in the strategies they formed within these constraints. Because of Iran’s unique national identity which resided in a discursive

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<sup>92</sup> Najmabadi, “Verdicts of Science, Rulings of Faith,” 544.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

collocation between a “pre-Islamic glorification of Persianness, and a territorially bound membership in Shi’a Islam,” gender roles were dually affected. Gendered nationalism in the case of Iran normalized the representation of the male gender from both identities stationing women into subordinate spaces populated by overlapping sets of oppressive traditions, a veritable Venn diagram of patriarchy, whose only constant commonality was the imposition on equality. In some cases, women had no better options than to construct what Deniz Kandiyoti termed, patriarchal bargains.

### **CHAPTER III WOMEN'S RESISTANCE**

Women continued to claw back space that was lost. They worked from spaces that were assigned to them by a patriarchal regime and resisted in many forms. Some of the methods were through vehement protestation and direct action, some via more subtle or behind the scenes pressures, and others through the careful and purposeful analyzation of Islamic justification of law, to create new spaces and bring about change. Women were able to confront the assignation of gender roles, family planning programs, and the valuation of virginity. They sought to rearticulate their identities in both public and private spaces challenging traditions and customs rooted in secular and Islamic histories. They contested attempts to control female bodies challenging issues of premarital sex, hymenoplasty, contraceptives and blood or sheet ceremonies. They carved out space confronting topics like dating, head coverings, divorce, polygamy, and abortion. They created small public voices to baby step their way to progress, by working from the private spaces to which they were relegated. For every step forward in the struggle for women's rights, there was pushback by the conservative religious ruling groups. It was this back-and-forth tug of war that continued to characterize women's resistance in Iran since the Revolution. The struggle for women's rights was a hegemonic confrontation which slowly shifted the continuum of women's rights as they constantly staked claims within the chimeric spaces defined between Iranian and Islamic identities but were ultimately confined by the Islamic framework which imprisoned it.

#### **PATRIARCHAL BARGAINS**

These negotiated locations allowed women to create individualized survival spaces from which they could shape, "women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influenced both the potential for and the

actual forms of women's active or passive resistance."<sup>94</sup> These transformable strategies watched women conform to gender rules that were unfavorable so that they could reposition themselves into spaces which provided more beneficial footing and the possibility of future resistive discourses. By submitting to their patriarchally determined positions, putting themselves in subordinate spaces to more senior women in the household, in addition to all men, a location removed from their own kin group, they faced hardship and isolation.

Patriarchal bargains are not specifically Iranian by nature, however, the unique elusive space created by dueling identities in Iran, provided the perfect space for women to create from within while remaining on the margins. By enrolling in these patriarchal bargains young brides subjected themselves to authority and governance. Resistance by these women began with active avoidance of their mother-in-law's control. Young mothers worked to inculcate unwavering devotion from their sons who would be responsible for their care when they got older. Meanwhile, older women in the household labored to suppress the couple's conjugal bond and wrest away the allegiance of the children. "A woman's life cycle in the patrilocally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship she may experience as a young bride are eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own daughters-in-law."<sup>95</sup> One of the only ways to break out of this cycle was for women to seek educational opportunities which might allow them to start earning their own income, granting them more freedom and agency.

"Although sexual and other services were wifely duties according to the law, child

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<sup>94</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, edited by Beth Baron and Nikki R. Keddie, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

bearing was not.”<sup>96</sup> By requiring sex but not the creation of offspring, who might later take care of the women after the husband died, or established a right to inheritance, it provided a vehicle for abuse. Considering these pressures, women became socio-legally bound as receptacles for their husband’s seminal deposits. Since reproduction had special benefits especially for women, there was no need to codify the practice, aside from ensuring their virginity at the time of marriage and their perpetual faithfulness. Contraception and abortion became tools that perpetuated this relationship instead of being used as methods for women to have control of their own bodies.

The only acceptable women in the Islamic state were the ones who followed Shari’a law, accepting the patriarchal interpretation of Islam from the government. Khomeini’s Iran perpetuated the notion that a women’s relationship with men could alienate them from their nature. Men and women were equal in the eyes of God. They both had political and social responsibilities as well as an obligation to pay *zakat*. But while the belief was that men and women had equal rights, Iranian women knew they were not the same rights. Issues like polygamy, adultery, and fornication found justification in the traditional interpretations which concluded men’s superiority and authority over women. This was an attractive and empowering view for poor rural women living in more commonly Islamic households who used the decrees to make men responsible for their care and well-being. The educated and middle-class, from more urban areas, who pursued careers and lived more secular lives, felt it was not appropriate for the government to define the true nature of a woman. For those women who opposed these religious interpretations the pursuit of more modern intersections identified them as exploited victims of immorality. The only avenues left for women to make their voices heard dwelled in their ability

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<sup>96</sup> Ahmed, “Early Islam and the Position of Women,” 70.

to reinterpret the very verses which validated and cemented the patriarchal traditions they were at war with.<sup>97</sup>

The juridical principal of *ijma*, or consensus, allowed for new authoritative legal adoption which could supersede existing laws. *Ijma* was the universal and infallible agreement of Muslim scholars or of the whole Muslim community regarding an interpretation. It allowed for Islamic lawmakers to refocus on new fundamentals in the Quran and Hadith, regarding Muslim women and their place, role, and treatment. This principal allowed the production of valid sanctions for new codes which replaced any repressive or patriarchal laws that existed in the past or which may come under scrutiny in the future. As women's movements urged Islamic scholars to continue to debate the "True Islam", space was created for women to appropriate. Homa Hoodfar recognized the benefit of Islamic feminists over secular feminists during this period and indicated that women were distinguishing between patriarchal traditions and Islamic fundamentalist interpretations. "The advantage of the new Islamist feminists over more secularized "Western" activists is that they challenge and reform the Islamic doctrine from within rather than advocating a Western model of gender relations."<sup>98</sup>

### CONTRACEPTION

After the formation of the Family Planning Board in 1989, health houses provided rural areas with locations to obtain public services. There were not enough of them to meet the needs of women. Although there were more women in universities than men, there were still not enough female doctors to service every woman, as was required by Islamic law. Women were placed in charge of birth control, which was made available from the government, however, it

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<sup>97</sup> Ferdows, "Women and the Islamic Revolution," 294.

constructed negative connotations for unwed women, painting them as sluts. Women were required to make monthly visits to doctors to obtain the prescriptive medicines. This was difficult for rural peoples and people from low socioeconomic status environments due to the traveling costs. Many women were embarrassed and ashamed to admit having sex out of wedlock, as virginity carries such importance for getting married in the Islamic cultural practices of Iran.

Most women seeking contraception were on the pill. To monitor women's health, they were expected to get regular monthly checkups to renew their supply. With so few doctors to serve all the women, it was difficult to obtain regular appointments. Even those who did take the pill regularly, did not always take the dose as prescribed. "One 1991 study covering 1,000 urban and 1,000 rural households in Tehran province, where the public is assumed to have easier access to information, indicated that over 25 percent of participants, including rural and urban and a considerable number of literate women, took the pill either every other night or only before intercourse."<sup>99</sup>

In 1989, the Reproductive Health and Family Planning Program was revived. It raised the number of women who used contraception and reduced the fertility rate giving women a measure of control over their bodies. The gap between urban and rural contraceptive use shrank by ten percent, but it was largely due to better educated urban couples finally mastering the practice of withdrawal, resulting in a reduction in the birthrate for young married women from 6.6 children in 1986 to only 2.1 children in 2000. That same year, seventy-three percent of married women

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<sup>98</sup> Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires," 17.

<sup>99</sup> Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires," 14.



between the ages of 15 and 49 were using contraception in Iran.<sup>100</sup>

Another factor which contributed to the success of the Family Planning Program and in the increased safety of women occurred in 1993 when the Republic removed the economic incentives which rewarded couples for having multiple children. It ended the policy where parents would receive government subsidies for every child beyond the third child. They withdrew food coupons and ended paid maternity leave. In 2001, Iran opened their first condom factory which distributed more than 70 million specimens a year. The government, to further curtail population growth, offered free tubal ligations and vasectomies. Initially, the Shi'ite *ulama* had ethical concerns, but the Shi'ite jurists determined that sterilization was not body disfigurement, as had been concluded in other branches of Islam. They pronounced that it was merely a form of medical surgery so long as it was not permanent. They argued that tubal ligations and vasectomies could be reversed. Years later, in 2007, Ayatollah Khamenei explicitly removed the reversibility condition from the practice.<sup>101</sup> They remained free of charge until 2012. Later, the government, in a desperate attempt to jumpstart the birthrate, pursued bills which would have penalized the surgeries with jailtime and blood money fines.

These swings by the government between encouraging fertility rates and promoting fertility limitation destabilized portions of women's resistance. When fertility rates were high women were able to passively postpone subsequent pregnancies for a short time, up to two years by breastfeeding.<sup>102</sup> Women's organizations inserted their voices into the public dialogues with

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<sup>100</sup> Amir Mehryar, Shirin Ahmad-Nia, and Shahla Kazemipour, "Reproductive Health in Iran: Pragmatic Achievements, Unmet Needs, and Ethical Challenges in a Theocratic System," *Studies in Family Planning* Vol. 38, No. 4 (December 2007): 354, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20454429>.

<sup>101</sup> Mehryar, Ahmad-Nia, and Kazemipour, "Reproductive Health in Iran," 356.

<sup>102</sup> Mohammad Mirzaie, "Swings in Fertility Limitation in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2005): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920500056973>.

their entreaties to begin family planning programs which would limit fertility rates. These efforts targeted familial traditional impositions on women's bodies as vessels for procreation. When fertility rates were low the government initiated policies, which cut previously won services such as subsidized contraception and abortions. They increased maternity and paternity leave seeking to reinvigorate the growth of families, consigning women to their traditional domestic roles as mothers, without any discourse. Wives had no choice but to reclaim their fuller identities as women, lest they became thought of as mere apparatuses to produce male heirs. These fluctuations in fertility resulted in endless contestation vacillating the positions of women to have their voices heard.

### **THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION**

Some of the ways that the Tehrani youth resisted the theocratic rulings were to pushback against the demands of modesty set by the regime, which tried to enforce mandatory social and moral codes of behavior according to their orthodox interpretation of Islamic law. "The Islamic clergy, in power in Iran since the revolution of 1979, sought to operationalize its power through a fabric of morality and by imposing their interpretations of Islamic ways of life on Iranian citizens."<sup>103</sup> By resisting they hoped to take back agency of their own bodies, while attempting to establish new perspectives on equality, sexual purity, and gender segregation.<sup>104</sup> There was a hedonistic culture of lascivious rebellion centered around premarital sex and other sexual behavior. Included were practices like, wearing less head and body coverings or wearing them in ways which revealed slightly more than they should. They wore brightly colored headscarves to

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<sup>103</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, "But What if Someone Sees Me?" Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran's Sexual Revolution," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 2009): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/MEW.2009.5.2.1.pdf?seq=1>.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

express personality and style, a rebellion of personal control over their own selves. Rebellious activities included marital infidelity, and the illegal practice of hymen reconstruction, which targeted the social and cultural religious customs centered around virginity before marriage. This insurgency, especially for women, was couched in a religious culture that also labeled promiscuous women as ‘sluts’ and ‘tainted’, formidable obstacles to future marriage prospects who valued virginity at the time of marriage above all else. Women struggled with the intense social pressures and ramifications of their decisions. On one hand, these women wanted to be active members of their peer group, date love interests, and participate in the changing sexual culture. On the other hand, they feared that should they lose their virginity, they would no longer be considered good candidates for marriage and could become estranged from their parents and family or even remain single.<sup>105</sup>

After the passing of Khomeini, women increased their pressure on the state to grant more reforms. Eventually, women started to practice discrete forms of resistance to the Islamic theocratic impositions of laws which sought to control the lives of Iranian citizens and were enforced by the morality police, the infamous *Komite*. These forms of resistance manifested in the lives of young urban adults struggling to understand the justification of seemingly arbitrary rules governing their lives. This sexual and sociocultural revolution was played out in the streets and homes of Tehran, sparked by the defiant discourse of young urban Iranians.

The changing sexual behavior of Tehrani youth, in the face of religious governmental pushback against President Khatami’s reforms, displayed an intersectionality between sexuality and politics. As the theocratic regime infiltrated more of their lives, attempting to govern female

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<sup>105</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 147.

bodies, the youth resisted the strict moral policies. This took place at a time when young adults made up the majority of the population and struggled as Iran moved through a depressed economic period, leaving many searching for work, unhappy with the government's inability to pass policies to right the ship.<sup>106</sup>

This sexual revolution took place in both the public and private spheres of urban culture. Publicly, the resistance defied Islamic dress codes, replacing the typical mass demonstrations in the streets that took place in other countries. Privately, sexual behaviors took the form of political dissent voiced in sequestered spaces but forced into public discourse. This occurred because the Iranian morality police, the *Komite*, investigated and pursued justice into the private homes of citizens. Any private acts became public acts of resistance because they were arrested, persecuted, and punished for acts determined to be morally criminal behaviors, even behind closed doors.<sup>107</sup> Women's bodies were invaded when the police checked for the status of female virginity. As time passed, these acts of resistance began to delegitimize the immutable voice of the theocratic regime.

### **MARRIAGE ALTERNATIVES WITHIN AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK**

The valuation of virginity, defined by both identities imposed on the women of Iran, demarcated sharp boundaries for premarital behaviors. The arbitrary trophy needed only to be sustained until the resplendent moment of their wedding night consummation, evidenced by the tell-tale spotting on the sheets, proof of the unpolluted offering of themselves to their husbands. Women during the post-revolutionary period found alternatives despite the threat of punishment both legal and vigilante. The common belief among the faithful that premarital sex was

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 7-16.

<sup>107</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 300-301.

disrespectful and dishonorable led family members to exact their own justice or in some cases to assist law enforcement agencies in these apprehensions. In one case, as recently as 2004, there was news of a, “public execution of a seventeen-year-old girl who was turned in to the authorities by her grandfather, who *suspected* her of engaging in premarital sex.”<sup>108</sup> In this context, the valuation of virginity ushered in a devaluation of women’s lives.

Although efforts were being made to shift Islamic laws by introducing more liberal interpretations of religious texts, young Iranian adults continued to live their lives guided by the socio-legal parameters whose circumvention could have resulted in legal penalties or harassment from the community. Options for couples who weren’t ready for marriage but who desired to express their sexual freedom included those which continued to operate within the framework of patriarchal constraints. Women worked to expunge societal violations reproducing a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate of virginity, leaving future inquisitors none the wiser. Choices included, thigh sex, oral or anal sex, hymen reconstruction, and abortion.

Combined with the promotion of education and a robust industrialization, these occupations of public spaces by women’s voices correlated with positive changes. The biggest impacts took place in the urban areas which tended to be less conservative than rural areas and where higher rates of education led to more economic empowerment for women.<sup>109</sup> Immediately following the Revolution the minimum age for girls to marry was lowered from 18 to 9. Thanks to women’s efforts, the age was raised back to 13 by the end of the 1980’s however, a critique of data from the Statistical Center of Iran focusing on a Survey of Socio-economic Characteristics

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>109</sup> Roksana Bahramitash and Shahla Kazemipour, “Myths and Realities of the Impact of Islam on Women: Changing Marital Status in Iran,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 2006): 114, <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/10669920600762066>.

of the Family, revealed that the percentage of women who married at a young age slightly decreased over the period of the survey, from 1966-2002. Furthermore, as the Islamic Republic established Shari'a law, the age gap between men and women's first marriages shrunk, thanks largely to a gradual increase in the mean age of women.<sup>110</sup> There was also a decline in arranged marriages and an increase in the number of single women in Iran. "The latter point is particularly interesting because, legally, men can have more than one wife. But the increasing number of single women indicates that polygyny is not a widely accepted practice."<sup>111</sup> The shift in attitudes since the Revolution has not manifested in the dialogue promoted by the Islamic Republic, but it clearly has become evident in the popular decisions that couples made in the home and in their interpersonal relationships.

Due to the socioreligious threat of shaming which surrounded public displays of affection and premarital sex, young couples were not able to participate in courting practices. There was no space where couples could publicly be unwed and be together in public, without a chaperone. This made it very difficult to develop any relationships. Instead, Tehrani youth were forced to hide their coupling by sneaking away moments in cars or empty houses. This put pressure on young dating couples to make the most of the little private time that they could acquire, so they often opted to introduce sex very quickly into their relationships, as there were very little dating options. Consequently, the relationships evolved to function solely as sexual opportunities. In these cases, the restrictive cultural and religious environment served as a contributor to resistance against itself.

Due to the socioreligious requirement of bridal virginity, women were made responsible

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 115.

for their purity. Hymenoplasty, the surgical procedure which restores the hymen to produce bleeding after sex on the wedding night, became an option for those willing and able to pay a doctor covertly. Bleeding buoyed the conviction that the female was a virgin and thus would only ever produce a child from her new husband. Sheet or blood ceremonies verified that there was no danger that a new wife could have been pregnant with someone else's child during the wedding or could lead to a child being raised by someone who was not the child's father. Following the turn of the century when the sexual revolution was in full swing, hymenoplasty became widespread, amidst religious objections, and was accepted as a "tactful solution for rebellious girls trying to negate unequal power relations and negotiate between dominant models of gender and their own subjective experiences."<sup>112</sup>

Girls were always expected to be unavailable sexually in Iran, due to Islamic policies of shame. And while women were not viewed as the sex which was weaker when it came to temptation, they were viewed as more controllable. This coupled with a long history of patriarchal views placed the sole responsibility on women to maintain purity. Men did not have the same apparatus of shame attached to their sexuality and purity. Thus, for those who could afford it, the surgical procedure of hymenoplasty was made a valid option which cosmetically solved the problem. For those less fortunate, without access or funds, the solution consisted of two small caplets full of red fluid, which were inserted just before the wedding night activity, to sufficiently produce the desired result, blood on the sheets. "The evidence suggests that women who engage in premarital sex and subsequent hymenoplasty, use their bodies as a mark of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>112</sup> Marzieh Kaivanara, "Virginity Dilemma: Re-creating Virginity Through Hymenoplasty in Iran," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* Vol.18, No. 1 (2016): 72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691056.2015.1060532>.

resistance to the state and its hierarchies.”<sup>113</sup> By circumventing the imposition of the patriarchal valuation of virginity at the time of marriage, women were able to work within the constraints of the framework imposed on them. While appearing to accommodate the superordinate system they were able to perpetuate a scheme of survival and persistence.

Women who obtained hymenoplasties did so in opposition to the patriarchal rules, redefining the discourse based on the reality of their lives, by choosing to secure power for themselves. By resisting the sociocultural mores which governed cultural Tehrani youth, they were seizing social control and wresting it away from the intrusive state which had imposed those theocratic judgments upon them. Consequently, the efforts were beginning to make strides in changing the responsibility of gendered constructs. In 2006, “Qom-based Islamic cleric Ayatollah Rouhani issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) clarifying that hymenoplasty is permissible under Iran’s Islamic law, stating that there was “no difference between a real or a fake hymen.”<sup>114</sup>

Over time some progress was made. “These young adults have succeeded in capturing the attention of members of the regime and in bringing about change. Their ability to affect President Rafsanjani’s conservative policies is evidence that political change happened.”<sup>115</sup> As the largest population group in the country, the youth of Iran were able to appeal to the political leader in this Republic because their votes were needed. This change in culture resulted in a “loosening of social restrictions” at times. It led to a more open dialogue about sexual comportment and the ability of the government to infiltrate the lives and behaviors of citizens.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>114</sup> Azal Ahmadi, “Recreating Virginity in Iran: Hymenoplasty as a Form of Resistance,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 2 (2016): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12202>.

<sup>115</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 303.



Still, despite the inroads made, discrimination in law and practice continued to be enacted on women in Iran. A constant political battle continued to navigate and define the space between Islamic feminism and non-Western modernity. For every loosened social restriction, one was reinstated. There were constant efforts to co-opt political power through the shifting of pawns on the chessboard of social control. Violence against women and girls, including domestic violence continued. The legal age of marriage remained at 13, with parental consent and younger than 13 with permission from a judge who got special requests from grandfathers or fathers who wished to marry their daughters off at even younger ages.<sup>116</sup> Early marriage is seen a key behavior for maintaining domesticity and motherhood. It is how men maintain traditional gendered roles in marriage.<sup>117</sup> It hinted at the idea that the opposition to democratic values and gender equality was based on more than their interpretation of the religious texts. In 2019, a video of an 11 year old girl getting married in Iran caused shock and outrage. Authorities were pressured into investigating the event and ultimately annulled the temporary marriage and brought charges against the would-be husband, the cleric who married them, and the child's caretakers. They violated the law because they did not obtain permission from a judge.<sup>118</sup>

Some single women participated in thig sex as they became prepared to experiment sexually before marriage. Girls coming from strict or religious families often believed that occupying the same confined space as a boy constituted a sin. Premarital sex would have been

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<sup>116</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Child Bride: 11-Year-Old Iranian Girl's Marriage Annulled After Public Outcry," *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-child-bride-marriage-annulled-outcry-11-year-old/30146652.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, S. Philip Morgan, Meimanat Hossein-Chavoshi, and Peter McDonald, "Family Change and Continuity in Iran: Birth Control Use Before First Pregnancy," *J Marriage Fam* Vol. 71, No. 5 (December 1, 2009): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00670.x>.

<sup>118</sup> Esfandiari, "Child Bride."

too far for conservative women to leap. *La-paee* provided an opportunity for experimentation which operated within an Islamic framework. Thigh sex was exactly what it sounded like. It was where a man thrusts his erect penis between a woman's clenched thighs to achieve an orgasm.<sup>119</sup> The practice acted as a way for women to reclaim a portion of their sexual freedom from societal bondage without sacrificing the boundaries which they accepted.

Like thigh sex, oral and anal sex continued in the same tradition while shifting the boundary further down the continuum of sexual freedom. These forms of non-vaginal sex were a way for women to rebel against repressive traditions and impositions on their sexual relations. While anal sex and other non-vaginal forms of sex may keep women from getting pregnant, it does not prevent the spread of disease, nor the patriarchal demands of men. A twenty-five-year-old English teacher named Sharare, when interviewed by Pardis Mahdavi, commented about the practice negatively, "Women have gotten creative. Anal sex. They do a lot of that, and at young ages. For them it's a way to keep their virginity intact, but I think they are just making fools of themselves."<sup>120</sup> When illustrating the prevalence of anal sex as a substitute for vaginal sex, to maintain their socially and religiously required virginity, among the youth of Tehran, Ramita Navai described it as "ubiquitous."<sup>121</sup>

### **ABORTION AND CONTROLLING WOMEN'S BODIES**

Prior to the work of the WOI, abortion was illegal under any circumstance. The only exception was for married women whose life was in jeopardy and it was determined that the operation would save them. The punishment for illegal abortion, self-administered or without

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<sup>119</sup> Ramita Navai, "Stiletos and Hijabs: Iran's Sexual Revolution," *New Statesman*, July 25 – August 7, 2014, 39.

<sup>120</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 148.

<sup>121</sup> Navai, "Stiletos and Hijabs," 39.

proof of jeopardy, was up to three years in prison for the women and up to ten years for the person who performed the abortion. After the “legalization” in the 1976 Penal Code, abortions were permitted because it removed the punitive measures against the physician who performed it if stipulations were met. The abortion needed to be performed in a hospital or clinic within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. The operation needed to be medically safe for the mother and required the written consent of both parents. Finally, the couple needed to provide evidence of medical or social reasoning for the abortion. In the case of the former, the physician needed to attain the medical opinions of two other doctors.<sup>122</sup>

The imposition of Islamic law after the Revolution erased the gains made by the WOI, making abortion illegal again, aside from the exception to save the mother’s life. “Under the Penal Code of 1991, which was revised on the basis of a reformist interpretation of Islamic law, abortion became classified as a “lesser crime” involving bodily injury, which in turn is punishable by three to ten years in prison, accompanied by the payment of diya (blood money) or compensation paid to the “victim” or, in the case of the “victim’s” death, to their relatives – in the instance of abortion, to the father of the fetus.”<sup>123</sup> This was consistent with the belief that wives and children were property of the husband. Women are held responsible for inducing abortion, while men are not punished by law unless they personally perform the abortion, themselves. Furthermore, women suffer disproportionately as the sole parent who is responsible for abortion. “Children’s rights activists in Iran have highlighted the need to eliminate inconsistencies in Iranian law as one reason why the abortion law should be reformed, e.g. the punishment for killing a child who is already born is less than that for terminating a

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<sup>122</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 254.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

pregnancy.”<sup>124</sup>

Between 1995 and 2000, the number of abortions in Iran was a staggering 2,590,681. Nearly as surprising were the 5,697 deaths which occurred due to unsafe abortions during the same period. Amongst countries from the Middle East and North Africa, Iran’s mortality rate versus abortions was the third highest. (out of 21 countries)<sup>125</sup> In 2005 two *fatwas* were issued by Islamic jurists. They are legal opinions in response to questions posed, based on interpretations of holy texts. These issuances said abortion in the case of a genetic disorder was permissible before ensoulment. The other permitted the procedure in cases when the pregnancy risked the mother’s life or health.<sup>126</sup> *Fatwas* are nonbinding unless they are codified into law.

Further fundamentalist interpretations established that the proper term for the ensoulment of a child occurs when the pregnancy is in its 120<sup>th</sup> day. This led to the passage of a new proposed law in 2005 which stipulated that abortions could legally take place for married women if the pregnancy was terminated within the first four months, there was consent from both sets of parents of the married couple, and the damage (deformity due to mental or physical handicap) of the fetus was confirmed by three doctors and the coroner’s office. Also, a pregnant mother’s consent was to be considered sufficient for therapeutic abortion. During this debate in the Majlis, all 13 of the women in Parliament sat out. This bill also confirmed that rape was not a valid reason for an abortion.<sup>127</sup> Sharia law prevented the Guardian Council from accepting the law.

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<sup>124</sup> Leila Hessini, “Abortion and Islam: Policies and Practice in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Reproductive Health Matters* Vol. 15, No. 29 (2007): 79, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(06\)29279-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(06)29279-6).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>127</sup> Frances Harrison, “Iran Liberalises Laws On Abortion,” *BBC News*, April 12, 2005, [http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4436445.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4436445.stm).

They disagreed with the new interpretation and determined mental or physical handicap which would cause financial hardship was not legal.<sup>128</sup> They also rejected the exceptions allowing abortion for fetal impairment.<sup>129</sup> After the Majlis revised and re-ratified the bill, the Guardian Council vigorously debated and approved the law.

The newly revised law no longer contained the provision for a pregnant woman's consent. This was an important weapon in the fight for equality. Without the ability of a pregnant woman to give full legal consent for therapeutic abortion, women were robbed of the ability to control their own bodies in a patriarchal society, where traditionally, a husband's consent was also required. So, women took up the fight through the offices of the Iran Legal Medicine Organization (LMO) by getting medical professionals to make the case. The LMO conferred with the head of the judiciary branch, who was also a cleric and could issue fatwas, about allowing requests by the mother without need for verification of marital status or fathers' consent. "This situation continued until October 2012 when LMO announced that the mothers' consent would be sufficient."<sup>130</sup> This process of using their voices to inspire medical professionals or legal scholars to arbitrate on women's behalf was a valuable tool in the fight for equality. It allowed for the creation of space within the framework in which Iranians existed. It took advantage of the smaller achievable victories without demanding the absolute ideal. And, it assisted women in working toward creating a cavern of space for their political voices to be heard, one spoonful at a time.

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<sup>128</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 255.

<sup>129</sup> Hessini, "Abortion and Islam," 80.

<sup>130</sup> Mahmood Abbasi, Ehsan Shamsi Gooshki, Neda Allahbedashti, "Abortion in Iranian Legal System: A Review," *PubMed* Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2014): 78, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259335586\\_Abortion\\_in\\_Iranian\\_Legal\\_System\\_A\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259335586_Abortion_in_Iranian_Legal_System_A_Review).

Approximately 73,000 illegal abortions happen every year in Iran.<sup>131</sup> Many are performed by doctors risking their medical licenses. Others self-administer them using “morning after” pills. During the sexual revolution in Tehran, finding doctors who would perform illegal abortions was relatively easy for people with money. For those who were less fortunate, cheaper options existed such as the black market sale of abortion pills or even shots which were meant for animals. The cost runs around \$200 US dollars for the procedure alone, which does not account for any aftercare. “The high cost of abortion in Iran is mainly due to the fact that a woman needs to purchase an injectable medicine from the black market, or pay a large amount of money to an illegal health practitioner to abort her unwanted pregnancy.”<sup>132</sup> Physicians often needed to provide emergency aid to people who attempted to perform an illegal abortion. Side effects from abortion complications include, “nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and lower abdominal cramps and massive vaginal bleeding.” Many of the people who need emergency aid due to incomplete abortions receive assistance for infections and psychological distresses.<sup>133</sup>

“Complication of unsafe abortion are a significant cause of maternal mortality, estimated to be responsible for 5 percent of maternal deaths.”<sup>134</sup> Due to the strict legal abortion policy in Iran it is easy to deduce that illegal abortions would be more common in less religious regions. In Iran there is a significantly higher rate of incidence in urban areas than in rural areas. Because of this, there is also a much higher number of pregnancies per women at the end of their

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<sup>131</sup> Amir Erfani, “Abortion in Iran: What Do We Know?,” *PSC Discussion Papers Series: Vol. 22, Iss. 1, Article 1* (2008): 5, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/pscpapers/vol22/iss1/1>.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Amir Erfani and Kevin McQuillan, “Rates of Induced Abortion in Iran: The Roles of Contraceptive Use and Religiosity,” *Studies in Family Planning* Vol. 39, No. 2 (June 2008): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4465.2008.00158.x>.

reproductive years who are employed than there are versus women who are unemployed.<sup>135</sup>

Women from all regions use contraceptives of one kind or another, which includes withdrawal. Contraceptive use and the incidence of abortion is inversely related.<sup>136</sup> This suggests that abortion numbers reflect a connection to religiosity. “High prevalence of modern contraception helps women attain their ideal small family size, and high levels of religiosity diminishes the probability of undergoing an abortion when a contraceptive failure occurs, or no contraceptive is used.”<sup>137</sup> A system developed which functioned from within the Islamic space and worked for women. As it stood, women were able to get pre-natal screenings, but had no legal recourse to get an abortion. This raised serious ethical concerns. It questioned the, “moral, social, and psychological consequences for women and couples who are informed of a serious congenital abnormality, but who have no legal mechanisms to procure a termination.”<sup>138</sup>

When fundamentalist jurists sought and found interpretations to justify legal abortion before ensoulment in 2005, they focused on fetal impairment, listing 29 fetal and 32 maternal abnormalities or diseases, including congenital disabilities like thalassemia. Thalassemia was a blood disorder where not enough red blood cells were produced. “The economic and social cost of thalassemia is high due to patients’ lifelong need for monthly blood transfusions and treatment with the iron chelating agent desferrioxamine.”<sup>139</sup> It was the high incidence of this disorder which prompted the health sector to ask jurists to reevaluate the law. “In Iran for example, the

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<sup>135</sup> Erfani, “Abortion in Iran,” 8.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Erfani and McQuillan, “Rates of Induced Abortion in Iran,” 119.

<sup>138</sup> A. Ballantyne, A.J. Newson, F. Luna, and R. Ashcroft, “Prenatal Diagnosis and Abortion for Congenital Abnormalities: Is it Ethical to Provide One Without the Other?,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* Vol. 9, No. 8 (2009): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265160902984996>.

<sup>139</sup> Ballantyne, Newson, Luna, and Ashcroft, “Prenatal Diagnosis and Abortion for Congenital Abnormalities,” 51.

estimated cost of treating 15,000 thalassemia patients is US \$200 million per year.<sup>140</sup> By appealing to religious authorities, it allowed the jurists to work on new viable interpretations which might have validated a change.

*La-haraj* which means “unbearable difficulty in Arabic, was one of the validations that jurists used to justify the Therapeutic Abortion Act. “The rule of *La-haraj* states that the religion never imposes unbearable difficulty to its believers. Therefore, if the pregnancy imposes such a burden to a woman or her family, the Islamic law does not ask her to continue that pregnancy.”<sup>141</sup> Via this method, public concern was able to use the Islamic jurists to find religious interpretations which led to the passage of a new law regarding abortion. The Guardian Council eventually accepted the revised law which listed, “51 serious and incurable diseases that would cause the mother, the fetus or the future child to suffer as acceptable conditions for abortion to be performed.”<sup>142</sup>

Women in these cases are forced to decide between keeping and raising a child with thalassemia or choose to have an unsafe and illegal abortion. “An associated harm is the disempowerment of women in the process of reproduction. Women are faced with the choice of exposing their own bodies to harm or exposing their child to suffering in the future if the pregnancy continues to term.”<sup>143</sup> Choosing illegal abortions without the funds for aftercare medicines relegated the poor to choices that were even less safe.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Kiarash Aramesh, “A Closer Look at the Abortion Debate in Iran,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* Vol. 9, No. 8 (2009): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265160902939966>.

<sup>142</sup> Seyedeh Fatemeh Vasegh Rahimparvar, Asieh Jafari, Fatemeh Hoseinzadeh, Faezeh Daemi, and Fatemeh Samadi, “Characteristics of Women Applying for a Legal Abortion in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *East Mediterranean Health Journal* Vol. 24, No. 11 (2018): 1040, <https://doi.org/10.26719/emhj.18.001>.

<sup>143</sup> Ballantyne, Newson, Luna, and Ashcroft, “Prenatal Diagnosis and Abortion for Congenital Abnormalities,” 55.



Psychological consequences of illegal abortion among the women of Tehran were significant and considerably neglected. Outcomes included typical responses such as smoking, drug abuse, and eating disorders as well as depression, attempted suicide, guilt, regret, nightmares, decreased self-esteem, and anxiety about whether the operation left them infertile. Legal abortion on the other hand led to more positive outcomes. “Emotional problems resulting from abortion are rare and less frequent than those following childbirth.”<sup>144</sup>

During the one year period from August 2011 until August 2012, interviews were conducted in the Women’s Office of the Iranian Legal Medicine Organization in Tehran. Women were interviewed during the process of their application for abortion. Under the law, women were required to be approved by three specialists and obtain office approval, having proven one of the 51 legal conditions needed for a license. In total 1,378 applied for a license and 661 were issued. Of those who made a claim, 1,110 checked fetal indications and 268 for maternal indications, as the reason for the application.<sup>145</sup> The numbers seemed incongruous with the law. Over one thousand fetal claims were made however, only 596 were approved. The data broke down the fetal claims into categories and presented the breakdown for each. There were many fetal categories which contained varying amounts of both approved and denied claims. However, there were ten categories comprised of 225 fetal claims which were entirely denied. The ten categories were: “eye anomalies, mother’s own medication regime, mother’s diagnosed with a disease that could cause fetal abnormalities, mother’s exposure to radiation, positive screening

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<sup>144</sup> Abolghasem Pourreza and Aziz Batebi, “Psychological Consequences of Abortion Among the Post Abortion Care Seeking Women in Tehran,” *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 2011): 32, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3395931/>.

<sup>145</sup> Rahimparvar, Jafari, Hoseinzadeh, Daemi, and Samadi, “Characteristics of Women Applying for a Legal Abortion in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 1042.

test results for fetal anomalies, partial moles, amniotic fluid disorder, intrauterine growth restriction, and intrauterine fetal death.”<sup>146</sup> There were a total of five intrauterine fetal deaths which were produced as a reason for a license. None were approved. The data collected from the interviews indicated that the most common reason for not granting a license was due to a gestational age over 19 weeks, the cutoff before ensoulment. This forced the mother into an unhealthy and unsafe position, regardless of her choice. She could not carry a non-viable fetus. This is an example of the strict interpretation of theocratic law failing to address the reality of women’s outcomes.

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<sup>146</sup> Rahimparvar, Jafari, Hoseinzadeh, Daemi, and Samadi, “Characteristics of Women Applying for a Legal Abortion in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 1045.

## CHAPTER IV CONSEQUENCES OF RESISTANCE

### STATE IMPOSITIONS & MUNDANE ACTIVITIES

While President Khatami sought to implement progressive changes, the spiritual ruler of the country, Ayatollah Khamenei, (Khomeini's successor) pursued reforms which tightened state and religious control over the lives of Iranian citizens.<sup>147</sup> Many of the Post Islamist feminists acknowledged a form of gilded age of women's reforms. New interpretations of Islamic texts changed facets of women's lives, but harsh inequalities remained. Women were successful at clawing their way into public spaces, but problems remained concerning issues such as, "women's right to divorce, child custody, polygamy, and sexual submission, and the amount of a man's blood money was still twice that of woman's."<sup>148</sup> The women's movement was atypical. There were no clear leaders of the movement and the few activists that were participating were few and far between. Their efforts were fragmented and many of their forms of resistance were passive, although they were creating space for themselves. The strength of the movement resided in the coordinated membership of ordinary daily activities which served as munitions in the battle for equality.

Sociologist Asef Bayat defined their efforts as a nonmovement, where activists resisted through action and discourse. Upon examination it was the collective acts of defiance that defined the movement, regardless if they did not meet certain qualifiers such as illegal or individualistic, defensive or hidden. "Rather, they were also collective and progressively encroaching, in the sense that actors would capture trenches from the patriarchal legal structure,

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<sup>147</sup> Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 108.

public institutions, and family to move forward, so that each gain would act as a stepping-stone for a further claim.”<sup>149</sup> Feminists asserted their identity and created space which they carved out in controlled public spaces. Women had developed passive networks which constructed identities for the whole population of women. “Passive networks signified instantaneous and unspoken communication between atomized individuals established through gaze in public space by tacit recognition of commonalities expressed in style, behavior, or concerns.”<sup>150</sup> Women knew all about the struggles that they faced on a daily basis and had faced since the day they were born. It never needed to be articulated and explained. They are and always have been aware of the oppression that exists in their lives. This silent opposition was effective because it was perpetually enacted in the mundane practices of everyday life. Women understood that a more confrontational role would mean that they were prime targets for backlash from the state, society, and family. “This nonmovement operated through an incremental and structural process of claim making – similar to “quiet encroachment,” but intimately attached to the imperative of women’s persistent public presence.”<sup>151</sup> The power they displayed seemed ordinary but allowed them to claw out space over time.

Access to public spaces and positions necessarily provided women with excuses for further access. Women took what they could within the framework of Iranian Islamic society and worked from these negotiated spaces to stake claims and move forward. By building larger coalitions of women, their movement placed itself in the larger global effort for women’s rights, because they recognized that their rights were human rights, staking claim to their sought

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>151</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 111.

humanity. Over time, their collective actions evolved and were used at opportune times to selectively mobilize great numbers of social actors at rallies and protests. They utilized their electronic voices via social media platforms which transcended the constraints imposed by an oppressive regime. The efforts of Iranian feminists are elusive and adaptable, and they position women to reclaim stakes stolen by despotic actions of the state.<sup>152</sup>

### **REPERCUSSIONS OF RESISTANCE: STI'S & HIV**

There were negative implications for this sexual revolution as well, including both the mental and physical health of these youth. It resulted in changes in social behaviors which produced much higher incidences of sexually transmitted infections and the human immunodeficiency virus, even among straight females. There was a rise in the number of abortions and unwanted pregnancies and hymenoplasties during the sexual revolution in the early 2000's. This was due to the Islamic Republic's strict ban on premarital sex. As a result, sexual education programs did not address the risks outside of a framework for married couples. Due to the lack of information and the imposing social and religious threat of shaming, "many women were more afraid of the social risks of sexual activity (being seen or getting caught by the Islamic morality police or family members) than the health risks of diseases such as HIV."<sup>153</sup> Recent reviews of women's health in Iran have shown some alarming trends. Leading into 2016, female rates of HIV were predicted to increase by 546 percent. Men's rates of HIV over the same period were predicted to increase by 60 percent. Neither statistic is good, but clearly, the female population of Iran is in great jeopardy with incidences as high as 4.5 percent of the population. Likewise, the rates of genital ulcers were ten times higher in women than in men during the same

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>153</sup> Mahdavi, "But What if Someone Sees Me?," 4.

period.<sup>154</sup>

By participating in the sexual revolution, women were inadvertently taking part in political resistance, by refusing to be shackled by the patriarchal valuation of virginity. This effort to reclaim their bodies resulted in the accidental benefit of resisting the government and the restrictive culture created by the dominant religious and traditional discourses imposed on women, where socioreligious values became codified into law. There were many reasons for youth to participate in sexual activity including love and romance. One study showed that young Iranian “males were more driven by pleasure, recreation, peer pressure and impulsivity than young Iranian females. While women, were driven more by their need of support and physical care.”<sup>155</sup> The study also showed that 42 percent of women and 28 percent of men in the study regretted their sexual relationships. The different levels of regret were attributed to the different levels of sexual permissiveness in the conservative social arena.

### THE VALUE OF A LIFE

Iranian women who were married to non-Iranian men still could not pass on their nationality to their children, but Iranian men married to non-Iranian women were able to do so. In 2014, the Iranian Parliament banned permanent forms of contraception to boost the birthrate, in yet another display of state power invading women’s control over their bodies. The decree was issued to “strengthen national identity and counter undesirable aspects of Western lifestyles.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Hassan Joulaei, Najmeh Maharlouei, Alireza Razzaghi, Maryam Akbari, and Kamram Bagheri Lankarani. “Narrative Review of Women’s Health in Iran: Challenges and Successes,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* Vol. 15, No. 25 (2016): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-016-0316-x>.

<sup>155</sup> Zohre Ahmadabadi, Leili Panaghi, Ali Mandanipour, Abbas Sedaghat, Mandana Tira, Sara Kamrava, Gheysar Maleki, “Cultural Scripts, Reasons for Having Sex, and Regret: A Study of Iranian Male and Female University Students.” *Sexuality & Culture* Vol. 19 (2015): 569, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-015-9277-2>.

<sup>156</sup> Michelle Moghtader, “Iranian Parliament Bans Vasectomies in Bid to Boost Birthrate”, *Reuters*, August 11, 2014.

Even seemingly positive news revealed a patriarchal underbelly which remained handcuffed to an oppressive culture.

*Diya*, or blood money was a predetermined financial compensation paid to the family of persons who was killed or to a person who was injured. The person responsible for the death or injury paid the penalty. In July 2019, the state-run Fars News Agency reported on a new law declaring blood money would now be equal for a man and woman. Previously, the compensation amounts stated that the blood money paid for a woman would only be half that of a man. This seemed like a progressive step forward however, upon further investigation, the law did no such thing. Instead, the guilty perpetrator would still be required to pay the same amount for murdering a woman, only half that of a man's *diya*. The Supreme Court of Iran determined that the difference would be paid to the victim from a special publicly funded trust controlled by the state. "In its ruling, the Supreme Court judges essentially devised a way to circumvent a grossly discriminatory law without triggering opposition from the conservative Guardian Council."<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, when murderers could not afford to pay the *diya*, they would sit in jail until they could come up with the money, which may have been years. The ruling perpetuated the idea that killing a woman would only cost half as much as taking the life of a man, making them seem more dispensable.

These rulings supported a long history of undervaluing women's lives through legal means based on Islamic and traditional interpretations. Noted Iranian criminologist, Dr. Shala Moazami interviewed 220 killers who were in jail and found the reason each gender murdered their spouses were vastly different. "Men kill out of jealousy; the women want to get out of the

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<sup>157</sup> Center For Human Rights in Iran, "Blood Money Paid for a Woman in Iran is Still Half that Paid for a Man, Despite New Ruling," *Iranhumanrights.org*, August 2, 2019.

marriage.”<sup>158</sup> This was very revealing since Iranian law stated that a man would not have been punished for killing his wife if he caught her with another man. Those men would not have been in jail unless they could not meet the burden of proof, which is that four men must have witnessed it. This may have seemed arbitrary however, there was no stipulation for evidence when a woman caught her husband with another woman. The only recourse for women would have been to ask a judge for a divorce.

Another valid reason a woman had for a divorce would have been if she could provide statements from a doctor that her husband had beat her violently. The process could have taken up to five years before the divorce was granted and the judge and the police would have returned the woman to her husband in the meantime. In addition, even if violence against the husband were proved by a doctor’s written testimony, there was no legal recourse for the woman against the husband. He could not have had charges brought against him. This disparity in the law was pervasive and punitive, creating obstacles for women who continued to fight for equal rights.

In an interview with the Director of the Wilson Center’s Middle East Program, Haleh Esfandiari spoke about a confrontation with the Iranian government in 2007. During a trip to Tehran to see her mother, she was stopped and robbed of her passport, trapping her in Iran without a way to return home. Iranian intelligence agents interrogated her for six weeks and eventually took her to Evin Prison, accusing her of attempting to overturn the government. She spoke of her 105 days in solitary confinement and her interrogations. She stated that it was difficult to get the agents to understand that she held her position as Director, even though she was an Iranian-American woman, because the mentality in America was so different. America is

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<sup>158</sup> Nina Kristiansen, “Spouse Killings in Iran,” *Kilden genderresearch.no*, August 16, 2003.



filled with diverse people of all backgrounds from all over the world. It is a nation of immigrants. In Iran, Shi'ites have special access to certain positions in society. "So, in a country where opportunity is open mostly to one sect, it's hard to explain that employers never ask your religion or your background. It's your merit that counts."<sup>159</sup> The agents seemed very suspicious of scholarly programs and the exchange of academic knowledge. They believed that everyone was working to undermine the Iranian government and replace it with the goals of the United States government. It was in these interrogations that she first heard the term, "velvet revolution". Ultimately, they explained that it referred to the West's efforts to implement a regime change by fomenting a revolution through the spread of knowledge and by empowering women. They viewed the Wilson Center as a vehicle to gather like-minded people to start a revolution.<sup>160</sup> Iran's mentality was that they were under siege by the United States and its Western allies in Turkey and NATO. The empowerment of intelligent women in positions of power represented an assault on the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>161</sup>

Tying political attacks to the empowerment of women seemed illogical, however the patriarchal reinforcement in Iranian society helped put it into context. Shahram Khosravi revealed in his book *Prekarious Lives*, that the education of women transformed many societal norms and nurtured the idea that men were being robbed of their power. As more women sought education, it resulted in more female migration in search of schools to attend. This disrupted the male practice of choosing their spouse. Consequently, members of the Guardian Council villainized female education, stating that it led to the desire for employment and damages to the

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<sup>159</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, interview by Judith Havemann, "Ordeal in Iran: An Interview with Haleh Esfandiari," *The Wilson Quarterly* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter, 2008): 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40262343>.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

family.<sup>162</sup> It was believed that women were the reason for men's unemployment as they were stealing their jobs. This imbalance, authorities claimed would result in a social crisis. Having women in public spaces cultivated apprehensions about masculine identities. "In the shadow of modern women...men are no longer the men they were. They have almost been transformed into a third gender, floating between manhood and womanhood... [Men are] marginalized and submissive."<sup>163</sup> These examples of Iranian machismo fragility were part of the pushback in patriarchal culture, a certain kind of femophobia.

This normalization of sexism attempted to upend feminist efforts. It intended to disprove the notion that women were victims of patriarchy by recasting them as aggressors and emasculators. Khosravi explained the notion of *zanzalil*, "(literally, being subjugated and humbled by a woman),"<sup>164</sup> He went on to say that men in Iran used the term to tease other men and to humiliate women. Essentially, the term denoted connotations of men as "sissies" and someone who was "whipped" relegating them to non-dominant positions in their relationship. The term was prevalent in popular culture and jokes. There have even been researched books on the notion of *zanzalil*. One sociologist at Tehran University published a book, reinforcing the stereotypes and demonizing women. The sociologist, "rejects the idea that Iranian families are patriarchal, claiming instead that a majority of Iranian wives are authoritarian. The author states that the destabilization of families in Iran is due to the imbalance in power relations between

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<sup>162</sup> Shahram Khosravi, "The Precarious Family," in *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 40.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 41.

authoritarian wives and zanzalil husbands.”<sup>165</sup> Terms and notions such as *zanzalil* reinforced patriarchal structures dismissing feminist objections to paint women as monsters and feminine men as impotent daisies.

### **THE LEGITIMACY OF THE STATE: DEMOCRACY & DESPOTISM**

In 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah instituted the White Revolution, a series of reforms meant to drag Iran out of the backwardness it occupied and into the modern world. The unintended consequences of industrialization forced people into urban areas, resulting in poverty and chaos. One of the socioeconomic reforms centered on a redistribution of land. Religious conservatives fiercely opposed the land reform because they owned large tracts of land due to religious endowments. This threatened to erode part of their economic power base. The *ulama* realized they were fighting a losing battle because the land reform had massive popular support.<sup>166</sup> They decided to attack a different component of the reform which extended political rights to women, giving them the right to vote. Their actions resulted in the exile of the most outspoken opponent, the young Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>167</sup>

The attempt to use women as a weapon to preserve power during the Pahlavi Monarchy illuminated the third chimeric space in which women have had to place themselves. As Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr, pointed out in 2010, none of the conservative leaders who have ascended to political power have accepted the “primacy of democracy nor the premise of equality between men and women (or Muslims and non-Muslims), both of which they viewed as

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr, “Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality in Iran,” *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 6 (2010): 887, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27896587>.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 888.

contrary to their reading of divine scripture.”<sup>168</sup> Women sought to find reinterpretations of Islamic texts which promoted more liberal views of democracy and equality. Many were suggested but few materialized into progressive changes. Women made innovative arguments and found intellectuals who provided the proper Islamic framework, which helped women to minimize the gap between Islamic and secular perspectives. In theory, the propositions should have become laws, especially since many had widespread popular support. They did not become laws. Instead, the Supreme Leader imposed his specific fundamentalist understanding of Shari’a to relegate any alternative readings to a subaltern position beneath the radical Islamic vision.<sup>169</sup>

Initially, women battled for space from between modernity and Islamic morality. Then they sought to reinterpret the texts to continue fighting for women’s rights from a space between Iranian democratic nationalism and fundamentalist Shari’a. Next, because radical conservatives refused to relinquish any power and chose to countermand even legitimate gender laws which have been passed by the Majles and verified by liberal clerics, women found themselves working from a new space, fighting from between the democratic will of the people and the despotic imposition of a singular radical fundamentalist Shari’a. It was from here that women created space in the last decade.

In Iran, the larger obstacle to gender equality had more to do with the undemocratic relationship between the state and the society and less to do with the actual or potential compatibility (or lack, thereof) legitimate religious interpretations. The problem was not that Islamic texts were used as guidelines for all the laws. The problem was that the structure of the state governmental systems was ultimately despotic and answerable to no one. Iran had what

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<sup>168</sup> Hoodfar and Sadr, “Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality in Iran,” 885.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 886.

appeared to be a democracy because the Supreme Leader allowed it to appear that way. “Political players representing diverse social, political, and gender visions were in competition for access to power and resources, culminating in the creation of a dualistic state structure in which non-elected and non-accountable state authorities and institutions were able to oversee the elected ones.”<sup>170</sup> Because there was a singular pursuit of a specific interpretation without regard for alternative legitimate and valid interpretations of Shari’a law, the Supreme Leader was able to use the state structure as a tool to maintain the power to despotically impose his radical conservative understanding on the people of Iran.

The Supreme Leader controlled the Guardian Council who, through no power granted to them in the Constitution, oversaw the approval of all political candidates. “This exercise of control over who may participate in elections by an unaccountable council has resulted in intolerance of any dissent, regardless of whether it is secular or operating from within a religious framework (as in the case of many reformists).”<sup>171</sup> When any reformists were disqualified for operating within an Islamic Shi’a framework, just because it was divergent from the radical vision of the Supreme Leader, it flew in the face of a Shi’a tradition which respected a “diversity of religious views among the *ulama*.”<sup>172</sup> Acts such as these threatened to erode the legitimacy of the state.

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<sup>170</sup> Hoodfar and Sadr, “Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality in Iran,” 885.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 890.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER V RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: RESISTANCES AND REPRISALS

While interviewing Mahnaz Afkhami, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani noted the method of implementing changes in women's lives benefitted from the acceptance of small changes and reforms as victories, instead of requiring the ideal as an all or nothing proposition. "We can move forward better and eventually accomplish more by welcoming small reforms, get them implemented, and then demand more."<sup>173</sup> The people who continued to oppose women's reforms, she thought, did so because they questioned the legitimacy of the regime, so they perpetually set themselves in opposition of any progress it might make. As a result, the efforts to create space for women's political voices were either discarded out of hand or, provisionally stalled.

Marjane Satrapi the author of *Persepolis*, the groundbreaking autobiographical graphic novel was interviewed by Emma Watson for *Vogue* magazine. She was asked if life was any easier for women compared to her childhood, which took place during the Revolutionary period in Iran. She stressed the importance of feminist gains in education, concluding that girls were getting married today who were more educated than their husbands. This she declared was the way for women to defiantly challenge the notion that women are worth half of men. Education was the key which could unlock economic independence which in turn would liberate the populace and secure true democracy. "The enemy of democracy is patriarchal culture. As with the family, where the father of the family decides and has the last word, so a dictator is the father of the nation."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani.

<sup>174</sup> Marjane Satrapi, interview by Emma Watson, "Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi," *Vogue*, August 1, 2016.

In their book, *Persuasive Acts*, Shari J. Stenberg and Charlotte Hogg dedicate a chapter to Shirin Ebadi. Ms. Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her efforts to promote civil rights and democracy for women and children in Iran.<sup>175</sup> She was the first woman and first Iranian to receive the award. Before the Revolution, she had been a judge, but Khomeini's reforms removed all women from the bench, and she was forced to resign. She taught at the University of Tehran for 13 years while she awaited the renewal of her law license. It was refused until 1992. Her efforts for women and children began when she got her law practice back. During her activist years, prior to 2003, she helped mentor many young activists. In an excerpt from her own memoir, *Until We Are Free*, she talks about meetings she had with Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani and Parvin Ardalan during the planning phases of their One Million Signatures Campaign.<sup>176</sup>

After her Nobel Prize award, the Islamic state worked even harder to silence her voice. In 2005, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's paramilitary forces ramped up their pressure. They bugged her law offices, stopped her lectures, and detained her daughter. They used vans of trained policewomen dressed from head to toe in black chadors to shut down peaceful assemblies with tear gas, violence, and intimidation. In one instance in 2006, many women were arrested and charged with disturbing public order, fostering tension and unrest, and spreading lies.<sup>177</sup> The Islamic Constitution of Iran, "upholds people's right to free assembly and public demonstration, on the condition that no weapons are carried and the principles and tenets of Islam are not

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<sup>175</sup> Shari J. Stenberg and Charlotte Hogg, "Shirin Ebadi," in *Persuasive Acts: Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-First Century*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 38.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 40.

undermined. The women had only been carrying their handbags and a pamphlet titled, *Why We Don't Consider the Present Laws Just*. The crackdown was meant to crush the spirits of the activists and frighten them into compliance. Instead women's organizations needed to pivot to find a space from which to confront a despotic regime which acted outside of the Constitution it had written.

During her meetings with Khorasani and Ardalan, she advised them to encourage women to work as a collective to affect change. She wanted them to pursue avenues of inclusivity, "including traditional religious people as well as secularists, demonstrating the importance of forming an inclusive collective."<sup>178</sup> She wanted women to go door to door and to move the conversation in a national one. She recognized the membership of the Iranian feminist movement in the global fight for women's rights. Regardless of the harassment from the police, women's resistance started to bear fruit. They started to build grassroots supports from women of all backgrounds. The young activists were inspired by Ms. Ebadi's Nobel Prize award. It proved to them that the world was taking notice of their efforts. They launched their One Million Signatures campaign to protest legal discriminations against women. Their goal, Ebadi advised, should be to reform all discriminatory laws. When they asked her if such a goal would even be possible under a system like the one in the Islamic Republic of Iran, she responded. "This must be the aspiration, the Ideal. An ideal is like the sun in the sky. Perhaps no one can ever reach the sun, but you shouldn't forget that it's there."<sup>179</sup>

The campaign has gone on to create a wider debate about discriminatory laws. It has been an effective vehicle to speak to people and emphasize the peacefulness of the movement to

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<sup>178</sup> Stenberg and Hogg, "Shirin Ebadi," 38.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



prevent the government from creating an alternative narrative. Even when the arrests of some of the women began and their handbooks were investigated for contraventions against Islam, there was nothing to be found. Ms. Ebadi and her lawyerly skills made it impossible for the state to declare the activists apostates.<sup>180</sup> “The social aspect is key here, because the feminist activists managed to disentangle the women’s question from the high politics of East versus West, Iran versus the world, and the Islamic Republic versus democracy.”<sup>181</sup> Women were able to find the chimeric space between the ideologies and continue using it to stake new claims as they targeted the state structure and the imposition of discriminatory fundamentalist readings of Islamic texts.

In 2016, President Rouhani openly criticized the use of 7,000 undercover people whose job it was to take pictures and report to the morality police in Tehran. His opposition of this practice was a direct refutation of the policy set forth by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Many of Rouhani’s attempts to relax social rules have been met by Islamic hardliners who wish to stop the “infiltration of Western culture. They harshly criticized Rouhani last year for saying the police should enforce the law rather than Islam.”<sup>182</sup>

This wasn’t the first time Rouhani was at odds with the Supreme Leader concerning gender equality. Khamenei has a long history of accusing the West of being mistaken when it comes to gender equality.<sup>183</sup> In his mind, males and females have different purposes and different jobs. They are not interchangeable and should not be thought of as one entangled entity called a

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>182</sup> Bozorgmehr Sharfedin, “Rouhani clashes with Iranian Police over undercover hijab Agents”, *Reuters*, edited by Larry King, World News, April 20, 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Marziyeh Bakhshizadeh, “Women’s Rights in Iran and CEDAW: a Comparison,” in *Changing Gender Norms in Islam: Between Reason and Revelation*, (Verlag Barbara Budrich: Budrich UniPress: 2018): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv8xnfv0.6>.

human being. Women he argued, belong in the domestic arena and provide peace in the home. Having a paying job outside of the home would make it impossible for her to have the peace of mind necessary to fulfill her purpose. “If the woman herself does not have mental and spiritual peace, she cannot give this peace to the family. A woman who is humiliated, who is insulted, who has pressure of work, cannot be a housewife, cannot be the manager of the house.”<sup>184</sup>

Rouhani, the current President of Iran, is not thought of as a reformist. Had that been the case, the Supreme Leader would not have approved of or allowed his candidacy. And while he has not taken many significant actions in defiance of the Supreme Leader, he has spoken out on the issue. “This talk is true that the home is the foundation for society and reform begins in the home, but if we ignore half of the population of the country, we will not see real development and growth in that country. Those who are scared of women’s presence and excellence, or have other views, to please not attribute these wrong views religion, Islam, and the Quran.”<sup>185</sup> This seems to signify that the issues of gender discrimination which exist in law in Iran have no basis in Islam, presumably because various interpretations of Islam allow for more equality. Instead, President Rouhani seems to be pointing the finger at the ultimate presider and decider of law in Iran, the Supreme Leader, which he attributes with wrong views. Bakhshizadeh notes, “all arrangements of political structure are aimed at maintaining the power and ultimate authority of conservative policy.”<sup>186</sup>

In 2017, there was excitement as the Police Chief in Tehran stated that women would no longer be arrested for not wearing a *hijab* in the city. Compulsory *hijab* had been the law since

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>185</sup> Bakhshizadeh, “Women’s Rights in Iran and CEDAW: a Comparison,” 77.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 78.

the 1979 Iranian Revolution. He stated that women would no longer be taken to detention centers or have a judicial case filed against them. Normally, the morality police would arrest women who wore brightly colored headscarves or coverings where too much hair was visible. Activists were reluctant to celebrate because they noted the very carefully worded statement which indicated that if their scarves “accidentally” fell off, then women would be sent to “education centers”. They also pointed out that, “on the same day the relaxed response to dress code violations was announced, a young woman taking part in the #WhiteWednesdays campaign against compulsory hijab,” an online movement that was started by the female Iranian-born journalist, Masih Alinejad, “was arrested.”<sup>187</sup> This give and take is representative of the political gamesmanship between a regime that is intent on controlling women’s bodies and women who are resisting in a myriad of covert methods on a daily basis, trying to have their voices heard.

The Amnesty International report on Iran from 2017/2018 was disheartening. They summarized:

“The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as freedom of religion and belief, and imprisoned scores of individuals who voiced dissent. Trials were systematically unfair. Torture and other ill-treatment was widespread and committed with impunity. Floggings, amputations and other cruel punishments were carried out. The authorities endorsed pervasive discrimination and violence based on gender, political opinion, religious belief, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity. Hundreds of people were executed, some in public, and thousands remained on death row. They included people who were under the age of 18 at the time of the crime.”

They continue by stating that women are “entrenched” in discrimination, including violence, forced marriages, and other violations, including the arrest and imprisonment of women

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<sup>187</sup> WITW Staff, “Police in Tehran Say Women Will No Longer Be Arrested for Not Wearing a Hijab,” *Womenintheworld.com*, December 29, 2017.

activists who attended women's empowerment workshops.<sup>188</sup>

Amnesty International also warned that an Iranian women's rights activist and medical doctor, Farhad Meysami who was jailed was in extremely poor health due to a hunger strike. He was arrested for protesting compulsory *hijab* laws in July of 2018. In August, he started his hunger strike and was in very frail condition.<sup>189</sup> On November 27<sup>th</sup>, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a female Iranian rights activist who was also a political prisoner, started her own hunger strike to protest the deteriorating health of Meysami. She was demanding his release.<sup>190</sup> On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 122 days after Meysami began his hunger strike, "a group of United Nations human rights experts issued a statement urging Iran to guarantee the rights of activists who have been put in prison for supporting protests against the mandatory hijab."<sup>191</sup> They urged the government to release the political prisoners who were jailed for protecting the rights of women.

In an August 2018 interview, Masih Alinejad, the activist, author, and founder of My Stealthy Freedom, who started the #WhiteWednesdays initiative responded to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's mention of her campaign. She clarified that the movement is a peaceful demonstration where women hit the streets to remove their veils in protest of compulsory hijab laws. She stated the Republic of Iran took women's bodies hostage. "We are not fighting against a piece of cloth. We are actually challenging the foundational block of the Islamic

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<sup>188</sup> Amnesty International Annual Report, Iran 2017/2018, [www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/).

<sup>189</sup> Iran RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty, "Jailed Iranian Women's Rights Defender in Poor Health, Amnesty Says", October 25, 2018.

<sup>190</sup> Iran News Radio Farda, "Prominent Rights Activist Goes On Hunger Strike In Iran Prison", November 27, 2018.

<sup>191</sup> Iran News, Radio Farda, "UN Experts Call On Iran To Guarantee Rights Of Detained Activists, November 30, 2018.

Republic of Iran. We are challenging the main pillar of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>192</sup> This she explained, was the reason for the government to sentence a #WhiteWednesdays activist to 20 years in prison. It was a way for them to strike fear into women. They intended to put a stop to any protests targeting the Islamic Republic of Iran.

After being asked why she described herself as a product of the Revolution, Alinejad responded that her parents only supported it because they were poor and they were hoping for a better life, but it never materialized. Instead, she countered, the Revolution was against women and Iranian people. To try and deliver on the opportunity for a better life for her parents, she started a revolution of her own in her family’s own kitchen.<sup>193</sup> After the Revolution, women lost all the social freedom that they already had. Gone were the female singers, the ability to enter sports stadiums, to play sports, to be judges, and to have the freedom to choose what they wanted to wear. She started a revolution of her own because people like her parents have not found a better life and they are suffering from a corrupt and cruel government.

Rena Ninan, the interviewer, asked her about a quote from her new book where she stated that the Revolution was a step backward for women and that being a woman born in Iran was like having a disability. Alinejad responded by explaining the attitude that the government has toward women which regards them as half of a man in legal circles, relegating women to second class status. Their rules often required the permission of their husbands, including traveling abroad and enrolling in school. Fortunately, Alinejad saw the promise of a new future for women in Iran, illustrating the activist fire that drives her campaign. “Women, right now, are breaking the law every day to challenge their regime, to show them that we are not disabled,

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<sup>192</sup> Masih Alinejad, interview by Reena Ninan, *Red & Blue*, CBSN, August 6, 2018, video, 7:39, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/iranian-activist-and-author-masih-alinejad-on-trump-treatment-of-women-in-iran-and-her-memoir/>.

and we are not going to be victims. We are the victorious. We are the warriors and we are pushing back the boundaries every day.”<sup>194</sup> The veil was a revolutionary symbol which made it impossible to ignore women as political agents. By keeping the veil issue at the forefront of popular consciousness women cemented their hold on the foundation of political space that they continued to build upon.<sup>195</sup>

In January 2019, Iranian activist Shaparak Shajarizadeh was interviewed by Celine Cooper for OpenCanada.org. Named one of the 100 inspiring and influential women of 2018 by the BBC, she joined the fight against compulsory hijab working with #WhiteWednesdays and #TheGirlsofRevolutionStreet. In the interview, Shajarizadeh expressed the opinion that women did not have a lot of rights in Iran. When asked about the hijab, she corrected those who claimed the veil was a part of Iranian culture. “It is a sign of repression. It’s about violence. Iranian women always have this shadow of fear when we are out. You don’t feel safe.”<sup>196</sup> She was arrested many times for her activism, with her husband, with her friend and her son, and on her own. After being interrogated and separated from her son after the police confiscated her car, phone, and money, in a city in the middle of the desert, she went on a hunger strike for nine days, as well as a water strike for three days. Eventually, she fled to Canada where she continues to be an activist fighting against compulsory hijab. She remembers the empowerment she felt when she first joined the #WhiteWednesdays initiative. “I felt very powerful. I’m a woman. I can be my voice and say no to compulsory hijab, no to violence. It happened little by

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Masih Alinejad, interview by Reena Ninan.

<sup>195</sup> Hoodfar and Sadr, “Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality in Iran,” 891.

<sup>196</sup> Shaparak Shajarizadeh, interview by Celine Cooper, “Shaparak Shajarizadeh and the Fight for Women’s Rights in Iran,” *OpenCanada.org*, January 3, 2019.

little. They pushed and we pushed. We're not going to step back now. We want our rights.”<sup>197</sup>

The Girls of Revolution Street are rooted in the #WhiteWednesdays movement which was started by Masih Alinejad. Together they have worked to bring women's issues to the forefront. By implementing modern strategies, they have been able to stay one step ahead of the oppressive methods to control and silence their messages. Alinejad's efforts started with a Facebook page titled, My Stealthy Freedom, which garnered half a million “likes” in the first month. It launched a campaign igniting the hashtag, #WhiteWednesdays, which encouraged women to wear white hijabs on Wednesdays to bring attention to the protest of mandatory hijab laws. Vida Movahed participating in the #WhiteWednesdays campaign appeared in viral videos of her standing atop a utility box as she removed her white hijab waving it in the air. Soon the #GirlsofRevolutionStreet hashtag started trending all over the world as women found their way to the same utility box to video themselves waving their own headscarves. “Alinejad has hosted a weekly show on Voice of America (VOA) television, and her campaign engages on multiple social media apps, where some of the photos and videos draw millions of views and thousands of comments.”<sup>198</sup> When a driver refused to transport a Tehrani woman because she was wearing her hijab incorrectly, the organizations protested by boycotting the ride-share app.<sup>199</sup> They have even employed new technologies which notify protest groups when police are nearby, allowing them to evade enforcement with one glance at their smartphone. By incorporating worldwide social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, these groups were able to spread their

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Suzanne Maloney and Eliora Katz, “Girls of Revolution Street: Iranian Women since 1979,” in *The Iranian Revolution at Forty*, edited by Suzanne Maloney (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 51.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 54.

message outside of the legal framework which preserves gender discrimination.

Women participating in these various forms of resistance have faced many obstacles and oppressions. They have been harassed and arrested. Many have fled the country to save their own lives and the lives of their family. By engaging in the modern movements, women have taken positions at the front lines in the battle for gender equality. And, while they are battered and wounded, they continue fighting from within the chimeric space they found for themselves. They have taken the examples left by the One Million Signature campaign about building large diverse coalitions but have found a way to do so while introducing a more confrontational and provocative message and style. “Their actions represent an implicit recognition that a new set of tools is needed to advance change in the Islamic Republic – that instead of working within the beleaguered rules of the game, it is time to contest the levers of power and the symbols that underpin the Islamic Republic’s claims to legitimacy.”<sup>200</sup>

Women continued to be targets of the current regime under President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Repression, intimidation, imprisonment and torture continued, but women would not have their voices silenced. “Today, seventeen women sit in parliament. In the current government, there are two women vice-presidents, one woman ambassador, four women governors of minor provinces and a handful of women mayors.”<sup>201</sup> Women faced challenges but continued to defiantly carve space out from the patriarchal impositions, occupied since time immemorial, which never rightfully belonged to men. They signed petitions for equality, facing prison terms. They organized in the streets, an ocean of women chanting for their votes be counted. They enrolled in education in much high numbers than men, and they purposefully and unabashedly constructed spaces by removing their veils in

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 59.



brazen protest. They push the boundaries of legal-social and religio-political state conventions. Social media and the internet have become their weapons, amplifying thunderous demands of justice.

Through it all, women never lost the ability to vote. They could not be judges, nor were they allowed to run for the Presidency. But, they were able to infiltrate the Majlis, in small numbers. At times, it seemed as though their voices were enough to break through and create permanent changes however, the Islamic Republic of Iran was more than a typical democracy. The President was merely one of the branches of governance which like the Majlis and the Iranian Supreme Court, were under the control of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council. And while the Guardian Council wielded great power, its twelve appointed members were selected from two groups. The first six were *faqih*s or experts in Islamic Law who were chosen by the Supreme Leader. The remaining six were elected by the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament, from among the Muslim jurists nominated by the Head of the Judiciary. On the surface, there seemed to be a balance of power, but the Head of the Judiciary was also the Supreme Leader. The chimeric space being pursued by women which promoted equality within the framework of Islamic Law, resided in the ability of women to shift conservative beliefs to more liberal understandings within the personal socio-religio-political interpretations of the Supreme Leader.

This battlefield for women between modernity and morality has been a perpetual contestation, a mixture of *de facto* and *de jure* patriarchy that counterpunches every gain in the struggle for space. The era of modernization in Iran witnessed the social visibility of women as they triumphed in creating significant reform. They earned the right to vote and developed a

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<sup>201</sup> Esfandiari, "Iran and the Women's Question."

national family planning program. Unfortunately, their work became associated with the centralized monarchy of the Shah and suffered the brunt of the Revolution. As the Islamic Republic formed, women's rights were undone and replaced with more discriminatory policies, unleashing patriarchal traditions from the domestic space into the public political space.

Women were forced to fight their way out from under the imposition of a double barreled barrage of patriarchy in their private familial spaces, due to the dual identities which coexist in Iranian nationalism. The gendered nationalism which defines how the rules and roles of men and women are created, place women in subordinate spaces constructed by both the local historical traditions and conservative Islamic religious values. As women made inroads, creating space for their voices to be heard and confronting the imposition of law upon their bodies, they were able to join the sociopolitical discourses. They continued their push for access to education and resisted socioreligious tenets which governed life in public and private spaces, carving out foundations in an era of increased openness and discourse.

Backlash followed again as Islamic hard-liners increased hostilities and repressed women's organizations leaving the Republic choked by sanctions. Activism was met by a brutal alliance of the military and the clerics, but the movement has reached out seeking new strategies from women's groups around the world. By working together and utilizing new technologies, Iranian gender activists fought through the state's efforts to keep them isolated from the global movement. "Women are becoming increasingly more informed of the current trends within global feminisms and more transnationally engaged, especially with regard to the mechanisms, tools, and machineries created through the U.N. gender projects and conventions of the

CEDAW.”<sup>202</sup> Global influence also resulted in the punishment of women as they participated in common activities learned through social media platforms. The state imposed vindictive penalties for ambiguous law violations for the appearance of potential improprieties. Women continued to resist through active and passive measures in pursuit of both equal and equitable treatment in public and private spaces.

Initially, the challenge existed in the fact that the Islamic State could never legitimately veer from valid interpretations of the holy texts and the women living in Iran could never relinquish their rights as human beings, constantly seeking the spaces to make their voices heard in the pursuit of equality. The necessity of women to carve out and occupy a chimeric paradoxical space, which zealously pursued modern women’s rights within the framework of Islamic ideological interpretation, left few terminal solutions. The fight for women’s rights subsisted in a space that evolved with Iranian state structures, inhabiting the location between two identities which could never coalesce. The state was steadfast and had traditional customs veiled in religious doctrine on their side but continued to need public approval to continue governing in a democracy. Once achieved the movement faced the harsh reality that their democracy meant little under the absolute dominion of a despotic ruler sanctified by the divine.

The women’s movement struggles to fight for their rights but continues to work within the framework of Islamic ideals. The limitations of new interpretations are determined by a Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council who have demonstrated their willingness to supersede valid interpretations as well as the overwhelming voice of the people of Iran, in an effort to maintain their grasp on power, imposing their narrow interpretation of religious Islamic

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<sup>202</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, “Women’s Rights and Feminist Movements in Iran,” *International Journal on Human Rights* 13, No. 24 (2016): 84, <https://sur.conectas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/7-sur-24-ing-nayereh-tohidi.pdf>.

texts by force and intimidation. The most promising outcome for women resides in their ability to be seen as a part of the larger international women's movement, which may help to direct strategies using the influence of global membership and the pursuit of human rights, to liberate the firm grasp on religious interpretation currently being held hostage by the Supreme Leader of Iran who sees "creeping secularism" in the liberal interpretations of holy texts.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Hoodfar and Sadr, "Islamic Politics and Women's Quest for Gender Equality in Iran," 893.

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