

# The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century Long Struggle

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The emergence of a women's movement in Iran goes back to the nineteenth century when Iran was experiencing some major socio-economic changes. It was in the midst of the Constitutional Revolution that Iranian society experienced an organized attempt by women to change their social conditions. The penetration of European forces into Iran and the influence of European capitalism hastened the disintegration of the feudal social structures in Iran. With the European advisors, diplomats, and goods, there also came European ideas and life styles. The increasing contact with Europe awakened many educated men and women to the repressive conditions of Iranian women and led them to view these conditions as problematic and in need of change. It was in a spirit of change that Constitutionals such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, Shaykh Ahmad Ruhi, Mirza Malkum Khan and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh wrote about women's right to education and the evils of polygamy and seclusion — ideas also raised by Qurrat al-Ain (Tahereh) in the context of the spread of the Babi movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Early criticisms of the plight of women in the country were also echoed in efforts and writings by Taj Saltaneh, Naser al-Din Shah's daughter, and Bibi Khanoum Fatema Astarabadi.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Constitutional Period**

The first episodes of the organized involvement of Iranian women in political activities are found in the food riots of the late nineteenth century: the opposition to the Reuter concession of 1872, and the Tobacco Protest (1891–1892).<sup>2</sup> The Tobacco Protest was the first organized political opposition by Iranian merchants, intellectuals, and *ulama* (clergy) to the Qajar dynasty and foreign domination of the Iranian economy. It was the first of a series

of collective efforts that culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911.<sup>3</sup>

During the revolution, women organized street riots, participated in some fights, joined underground activities against foreign forces, boycotted the import of foreign goods, participated in the demolition of a Russian bank,<sup>4</sup> and raised funds for the establishment of the National Bank.<sup>5</sup> In the course of this national struggle, some enlightened women realized the potential of women for organized political activities and used the momentum provided by the revolution as a venue for bringing women's causes into the open.<sup>6</sup> Becoming increasingly conscious of the oppressive conditions of women, these pioneering feminists established secret societies (*anjomans* and *dowrehs*), commonly held by Constitutionalists at the time in order to discuss the situation of women by sharing their personal problems, experiences, and feelings. Two of the most important such early secret societies were *Anjoman-e Azaadi-ye Zanaan* (the Women's Freedom Society) and *Anjoman-e Zanaan-e Neqaabpush* (the Society of Masked Women).<sup>7</sup> The argument to give women the right to vote was made in numerous writings in papers such as *Sur-e Esraafil*, *Habl al-Matin*, *Mosaavaat*, *Iran-e Nu*. In 1911, the representative from Hamedan, Vakil ul-Ruaayaa, proposed a bill in Majles that would grant women the right to vote and establish their own associations. These efforts were often countered by religious leaders who saw such suggestions as contrary to the laws of Islam. Two major figures opposing women's liberation at this time were religious figures Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri and Seyyed Ali Shushtari, who both saw schooling for girls as detrimental to women's status and against religious principles.<sup>8</sup> Since Qurrat al-Ain had converted to the Babi religion, Muslim female activists were often accused of being affiliated with Babis and of being subservient to foreign interests and cultures.

In 1906, the nationalist movement succeeded in establishing a constitution demanding the "equality of all citizens in law." However, women were not included in the definition of "citizen." They were instead put in the same classification as criminals, minors, and the insane. Religious leaders involved in the movement did not think of women as being capable of political and legal insight — a view shared by many male constitutionalists, as well. With the later setbacks in the constitutional movement and the suppression of activists, most associations and societies formed during the revolution fell apart; the majority of the women involved in the movement went back to their homes. The task of carrying the struggle was left to a few educated women who dedicated themselves to the development of an independent women's movement concerned with improving the social status of women in the country. Finding themselves in an uphill battle, female constitutional activists

targeted education as their primary battleground for improving women's status. Despite the *ulama's* opposition (and even harassment), efforts for establishing schools for girls succeeded in major cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Rasht, Hamadan and others. In 1913, Tehran had 63 schools for girls and 9 women's societies.<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of the women's movement in Iran can be seen in the formation and growth of women's associations and publications over a period of twenty years, from roughly 1910 to 1932. During this period, women established a number of organizations and published many weekly or monthly magazines dealing specifically with issues related to the conditions of women's lives. Some of these publications included *Daanesh*, *Jabaan-e Zanaan*, *Shekoufeh*, *Zabaan-e Zanaan*, *Zanaan-e Iran*, and *Naameh Baanouvaan*. In the mid-1930s, there were 14 women's magazines discussing women's rights, education and veiling.<sup>10</sup> Throughout these early developments, the movement remained dependent on the supportive efforts of influential male intellectuals such as Mirzadeh Eshqi, Iraj Mirza, Malak ol-Shuara Bahar, Yahya Daulatabadi, Abolqasem Lahooti, Ali Akbar Dekhuda, Vakil ul-Ruaayaa, Ahmad Kasravi, Seyed Hassan Taghizadeh, and later personalities such as Saeed Nafissi, Ebrahim Khajehnouri, Rezazadeh Shafaq and Khalili. Using their writings and offices, these intellectuals advocated education for girls, freedom of women from seclusion, and the abolition of polygamy. The most influential women in the movement of this period included Mariam Amid Mozayyen ol-Saltaneh, Mah Sultan Khaanom, Sediqeh Daulatabadi, Khaanum Azmodeh, Rushanak Nudoost, Shahnaz Azad, Muhtaram Eskandari, Shams ol-Muluk Javahir Kalam, Huma Mahmoudi Afaaq Parsa, and Zandokht Shirazi.<sup>11</sup>

Among the most important factors contributing to the development of women's organizations and the increase in their activities, in addition to the devotion of the early Iranian "feminists," are (a) the emergence and spread of the Baha'i religion, which emphasized women's freedom, (b) the influence of Western liberal thought on Iranian intellectuals, (c) the existence of Europeans in and their increased contact with Iran both before and after the First World War, (d) the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its influence on some Iranian intellectuals, (e) the emergence of the women's movement in neighboring Turkey and Egypt, and finally (f) the American and British women's victories in achieving the right to vote in the late 1910's.<sup>12</sup>

### **Reza Shah's Period (1925–1941)**

With the rise of Reza Shah to power in the 1920's, the movement began to suffer the constraints of a newly emerging dictatorship. Being another patrimonial despot, Reza Shah had no tolerance for any independent and non-conforming organizations, let alone anti-patriarchal women's groups.

Although he favored some changes in women's status, as will be discussed later, he gradually pressured women's organizations to withdraw their political demands and concentrate on their welfare and educational activities. The continual opposition to women's activities by the *ulama* and the government forced many women's organizations into closing to the point that in 1932, Reza Shah banned the last independent women organization, *Jamiat-e Nesvaan-e Vatankhaah-e Iran* (The Patriotic Women's League of Iran).

In 1928, the parliament (*Majles*) passed a new dress code requiring all males working in government institutions to dress like Europeans, except the *ulama*. In 1931, the government introduced a number of changes in marriage and divorce laws. A bill was passed in the *Majles* that gave women the right to ask for divorce under certain conditions and set the minimum marriage age for girls at 15 and for boys at 18. This legislation, according to Amin, proved to be far more important than any other changes introduced by Reza Shah's government in later periods.<sup>13</sup> Efforts to support women's participation in public affairs were expanded. The government invested a great deal of money and resources in the expansion of schools for girls.<sup>14</sup> In 1932, Tehran was the site of the Congress of Oriental Women. A year later some Iranian women submitted Congress' recommendations for electoral rights to the Iranian parliament. The *Majles* rejected this demand but the government began a series of reforms encouraging more protection for women in various social arenas. In 1934, Reza Shah initiated the development of a government-controlled women's organization called *Kaanoon-e Baanovaan* (The Ladies Center), headed by his daughter Ashraf Pahlavi. This organization began a series of welfare activities designed to both depoliticize the women's movement and create an image of women's involvement and participation in society as a sign of modernity — the latter being a major concern of the new king.<sup>15</sup>

In 1936, Reza Shah forcefully ordered women to unveil — a decree that had serious negative effects on the movement. On the one hand, the *ulama* used the decree as proof that the women's movement had no other aim than “making women naked” and “showing their bodies in public” — acts contrary to Islamic ethics. On the other hand, the state's determination in issuing the decree and implementing it vigorously, despite widespread opposition by public and religious leaders, convinced many early “feminists” to support the decree as a “progressive” measure necessary for confronting clerical misogynistic approaches to women's concerns. The success of the state in winning the support of women activists and some intellectuals resulted in further alienating clerics and a larger segment of secular intellectuals and activists from Reza Shah's modernization program.

## Mohammad Reza Shah's Period (1942–1978)

World War II opened another page in the history of the women's movement in Iran. The occupation of the country by the Allied Forces and the forceful abdication of Reza Shah from the throne weakened government control over the opposition and created an opportunity for the development of political parties and organizations. Again, several new women's organizations emerged, of which the following were the most influential: *Tashkilaat-e Zanaan-e Iran* (The Organization of Iranian Women), *Hezb-e Zanaan* (Women's Party), and *Jamiat-e Zanaan* (Women's League).<sup>16</sup> To these should be added women's organizations affiliated with political parties: the Sazmaane Demokratike Zanaan (Women's Democratic Organization) of Tudeh Party, Nehzate Zanaane Pishro (Women's Progressive Movement) of Society of Iranian Socialists, and Komiteh-ye Zanaan (Women's Committee) of Nation's Party of Iran (Hezbe Mellat). Women's calls for freedom, education, the abolition of polygamy and the veil received enthusiastic support from intellectual men such as Mohammad Hejazi, Sadeq Hedayat, Ali Dashti, Mahmood Beh-Azin, Ahmad Sadeq, and Bozorg Alavi.<sup>17</sup>

The most important feature of women's organizations in this period, in addition to their independence from government, as Sanasarian mentions, was "their close and inalienable association with various political parties."<sup>18</sup> Affiliated with the communist Tudeh Party, the Women's League was the most organized with branches in many major cities. Women again became active in the national struggle against foreign forces and were even involved in the political events of 1945 in Azarbaijan. A new development in this period was the participation of younger females in the student movement in universities. Many women joined student organizations and took part in repeated demonstrations associated with political events in this period.

In 1951, two influential women, Mehrangiz Daulatshahi and Safeyeh Firouz, met Mohammad Reza Shah and appealed to him for electoral rights. In 1952, various women's organizations again sent petitions to Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, the *Majles*, and the United Nations demanding equal political and economic rights, especially enfranchisement. In all cases, these demands were met with silence in fear of opposition by the *ulama*.

After the CIA-engineered *coup d'etat* of 1953, the young Shah began to assert his power more aggressively. He eliminated all oppositional and independent political parties and organizations. Since most of the women's organizations in the 1940s were attached to various political parties, they became subject to elimination by default. However, women's organizations controlled by the central government continued to live and influence the nature and direction of women's activities in the following three decades.

During this period, the government centralized women's organizations, unified their leadership, and de-politicized their demands. According to Sanasarian, this was the "co-optation and legitimation" period of the women's movement:

Henceforth, the women's rights movement entered an institutionalized and legitimate sphere of activity in which demands were still made upon the authorities, but in this instance the changes asked for were in accordance with the ones received. In other words, women's organizations did not make demands that could not or would not be met; their activities were quite compatible with the government's stand.<sup>19</sup>

In 1959, fourteen women's organizations were brought under the umbrella of the Federation of Women's Organizations — a federation later transformed into a new and more centralized organization: *Sbora-ye Ali-ye Jamiat-e Zanaan-e Iran* (The High Council of Iranian Women). In 1966, the latter was again replaced by a new organization called *Saazemaan-e Zanaan-e Iran* (Women's Organization of Iran) — an organization that lasted until the end of the Pahlavi regime in 1978. The organization developed branches in major cities with numerous smaller health and charity offices under its supervision. In the three decades of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, all women's activities were channeled through these government-controlled organizations. These organizations were incorporated into the government bureaucracy and were basically involved in charity, health, and educational activities. The only political demand these organizations made was that of women's enfranchisement — a right granted to women by the government in 1962 in the face of opposition by the *ulama*. Women's political activities, like those of men, were banned and violators were punished with harassment, imprisonment, and even execution (the latter practice started in 1975).

From 1966 to 1977, women's organizations and associations, as they were officially acknowledged and openly in existence, became apolitical, charitable, educational, and professional units under the surveillance of the state.<sup>20</sup> However, the state remained the major source for change in the status of women — a policy supported by the belief that ". . . without the support of the modernizing state and its political organs, which were controlled by men, women's rights are unattainable in an Islamic society. The law as the expression of the will of the state was indispensable to the securing of women's rights in Iran."<sup>21</sup> Thus, access to education and work outside of the home was made easier for women, despite the lack of any serious efforts to create job opportunities for them. In 1967, the Shah expanded his White Revolution programs allowing female graduates to serve in education and health corps. A Family Protection Law was passed that set tougher conditions for polygamy, raised the age of marriage for girls to 18, put divorce under the

authority of family courts, and created more safeguards against male vagary in divorce.<sup>22</sup> The state continued to increase the number of women in executive positions, enhance their opportunities in the public arena, and appoint women as judges — a practice condemned by Shia theologians. A woman was appointed as the Minister of Education. In 1975, family laws were further modified to give women custody rights, ease earlier penalties against abortion, and offer free abortion on demand. In the same year, women's affairs gained ministerial status and a woman was appointed to the position.

While important, these appointments were symbolic and minuscule in their scope. In the last 20 years of the Pahlavi reign, the number of women in managerial positions in the government never passed 2.8 percent (the same has been the case in the past two decades in the Islamic Republic).<sup>23</sup> All these developments took place in an atmosphere of contradictions between women's freedom and patrimonial repression. Women were appointed to executive positions in male-dominated environments with strong male cultures and structures. Imperial bureaucracy was a male institution intolerant of independent decision-making by women. Opposition to male decisions was not tolerated, especially on political issues. Opportunities came with limitations, social freedom with political docility. While at the end of the Pahlavi era (1978), 333 women were in local councils and 24 in two houses of the parliament,<sup>24</sup> there were 323 female political prisoners serving time in Iranian prisons! In the last 7 years of the Pahlavi reign, 42 female guerrillas lost their lives in street fighting with military forces.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Revolutionary Period (1978–1981)**

During 1977–78, when the movement against the Shah was formed, women again became a major force for change. To mobilize a strong force against the Shah, religious activists working closely with Ayatollah Khomeini, a formidable opposition leader against the Shah, tapped into the reservoir of religious women who had always supported them but remained secluded in their homes.<sup>26</sup> Using religious themes and rituals glorifying women, especially those revolving around Fatima Zahra and Zaynab Kobra as symbols of resistance to unjust rule, the *ulama* were able to bring these women out to open demonstrations against the Shah.<sup>27</sup> Seeing this massive outpouring of women against the Shah, some younger, secular, unveiled women resorted to the *chador* (veil) in a symbolic defiance of the Shah's Westernized dictatorship and in solidarity with the massive women's participation.<sup>28</sup> Women of all classes and ideological persuasions participated in these anti-government demonstrations.<sup>29</sup> Where some young women engaged in armed confrontations with police and military forces, older women offered them support and protection against police chase.<sup>30</sup> The latter were mostly members

of various underground political organizations such as the Organization of Iranian People's Fedayee Guerrillas and the Iranian People's Mujahedin Organization, both formed in the early 1970s. During the years 1978–79, the Women's Organization of Iran was abolished, several new ones were established, and some old ones re-emerged. These included the National Union of Women, the Committee for Solidarity of Women, the Organization of Iranian Women, the Women's Populace of Iran, women's branch of National Democratic Front, the Association of Women Lawyers, the Women's Society of Islamic Revolution, and the Muslim Women's Movement. The latter two, along with a number of small but influential other associations affiliated with the Islamic Republic Party and other Islamic charities, represented Muslim women loyal to the Islamic revolution and the newly established Islamic Republic.

Once the *ulama* managed to establish their leadership of the revolution, they began laying the groundwork for the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Their first move in that direction was to condition the presence of women in the public sphere by demanding observance of religious laws and new ordinances issued by the clerics. Soon after the establishment of the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Khomeini demanded the abolition of the Family Protection Act, ordered the implementation Sharia laws in the country, and issued a decree demanding women dress "properly." A female vigilante group (*dokhtar'an-e Zaynab*) was organized to maintain state codes of female appearances in public (and even some private) arenas. Numerous boundaries separating men and women in society were erected: "males and females were separated in higher education classes that were once coed, females students were barred from 69 different fields of study, women were banned from some professions such as the judiciary and singing groups, and female students were barred from certain disciplines in the universities, such as engineering and agriculture. A decree dismissed all women judges and barred female students from law schools. Women were forbidden to participate in some sports and not allowed to watch men in sports fields."<sup>31</sup> The universal Mother's Day was replaced with Fatima Zahra's birthday (Prophet Moḥammad's daughter). The new Sharia laws gave men an absolute right to divorce their wives without having to produce any justification. Child custody laws were also changed in favor of men: after divorce, women are entitled to keep their boys only up to the age of two and girls until seven. After these ages, fathers have the right to full custody. Women's judgment as evidence in court was declared to be worth half a man's. Blood money for a murdered woman was set to be half that of a man. If a murdered woman's family demands retribution in kind (*qesaas*), her relatives would be obliged to pay the killer's family the full blood money in compensation.

Understanding the implications of these laws and what Ayatollah Khomeini meant by “proper dress,” i.e., “forced veil,” women responded massively and angrily: thousands of women poured into the streets and demonstrated against the forced *bejaab* (veiling) and the abolition of the Family Protection Act. Their protests were often met by club-wielding, plain-clothed supporters of the revolution known as Hezbollahis. On March 8, International Women’s Day, women staged another protest against the newly imposed restrictions. Again, mobs attacked their protest and government officials accused participants of being tools of Western imperialism and a symbol of Western decadence. In the course of a year and a half after the revolution, women’s organizations pressed for equal wages, the right to choose their own dress, the revival of protective measures in the previous Family Protection Act, and the right to work in legal professions. The regime opposed all these demands and developed counter-strategies to divide the women’s movement and neutralize their struggle. Thereafter, the regime moved quickly to suppress the women’s movement, eliminate all women’s organizations, force women into the *chador*, segregate women in public places such as universities, schools, and government offices, and reduce women’s presence in public life by firing and retiring practices (nearly 24,000 women lost their jobs).<sup>32</sup> While secular women opposed to the veil or the Islamic Republic were fired from their jobs, active participation of religious women in supportive and “female” occupations was encouraged.<sup>33</sup> The new religious laws and government policies resulted in the retirement of large segments of defiant secular women from the labor force, the arrest of women who openly challenged the regime, and the migration of a large number of women who could not adjust to the new policies out of the country. Female marriage age was reduced to 13 and professional secular women were encouraged to retire from their public occupations in order to support male employment.<sup>34</sup>

For the third time in the history of the Iranian women’s movement, Iranian women participated and contributed to the process of political change. This time, however, their participation resulted in divisions among women and mixed results for women of different ideology, social class, and religious backgrounds. In what follows, I will explain some of the reasons for these developments.

## **Sociological Reasons for the Failure of the Women’s Movement in the Revolution**

The participation of women in the Iranian revolution of 1979 was historically unparalleled, both in terms of the depth and breadth of their commitment. Yet, their achievements were hardly close to the expectations that made such a participation possible. The reasons for this gap between

women's expectations and achievements in the revolution are to be found in both the nature of the revolution and the sociological characteristics of women's movements in the pre-revolutionary era.

Although the Iranian Revolution was a popular revolution based on the aspirations and participation of various social classes for overthrow of a dictatorship, it was the clerical leadership that could successfully mobilize even the most conservative and traditional sectors of the society against the Shah. In the past century and a half of social movements in Iranian history, no secular political party has ever been able to mobilize traditional women as extensively as religious leaders have. Religious leaders mobilized the largest demonstrations against the Shah — demonstrations that included not only secular female activists, who had been in forefront of opposition to the Shah all along, but also large number of religious women who often avoided participation in the public sphere. Ayatollah Khomeini was able to successfully unite various segments of Iranian society against the Shah.

However, these diverse cultural, ideological, class, ethnic, and religious segments participated in the revolution, each with a different vision of post-revolutionary Iran. Islamicist women participated in the revolution for bringing about the establishment of an Islamic state based on Sharia. Secular women participated in the revolution in opposition to the Shah's dictatorship. Women associated with Marxist organizations hoped for the end to the Shah's regime as a puppet of Western imperialist powers and the establishment of a socialist state. The majority of women, not devoted to any ideology or political orientation, joined the movement against the Pahlavi regime in the hope that their country would be free of dictatorship, foreign domination, and alienating cultural attitudes adopted by the Pahlavi regime.<sup>35</sup> Given this diversity of expectations and orientations and the strength of religious leadership and organization, it is obvious that the strongest party in the coalition would take the lead in imposing its own agenda on the revolution. That is exactly what Ayatollah Khomeini did, despite his earlier promises of working for a future democratic Iran.<sup>36</sup>

The most important division contributing to conflicting expectations from and outcome of the revolution is the division between secular and religious women. Secular women, mostly of middle and upper classes, were the major losers of this revolution. The religious policies of the new government restricted their access to the public sphere, forced them to comply with Islamic dress codes, limited their occupational and educational activities, and were harassed or arrested if they opposed the emerging Islamic ruling ideology. The same can be said of religious minorities whose cultural traditions and religious beliefs contradicted the imposed Islamic codes of dress, social interaction, and public appearance. While the Islamic Republic suppressed

much of what women had gained during the Pahlavi era, religious, traditional, and mostly poorer, women found the new opportunities offered by the Islamic Republic empowering. Traditional women, who were often banned in the past by their parents or religious authorities from having a presence in the public sphere, now found the dominant Islamic atmosphere in society less socially intimidating and more religiously acceptable. Furthermore, once sanctioned by the religious authorities, these women's husbands or parents had one less excuse for not allowing their daughters or wives to participate in the public arena.

The failure of the women's movement to gain what it had fought for was also due to its sociological characters. Despite my later argument in this article, the classical sociological models of social movement are not good explanatory theories for explaining the developments in women's movements in the 1990s and after, I find these theories helpful for explaining the failure of the movement until 1980. In its pre-revolutionary stage, the Iranian women's movement never developed the sociological characteristics necessary for a successful social movement — characteristics such as a well-defined set of objectives, planned regular activities, adequate organizational structures and networks, a stable and/or organized cadre of activists, a leadership, a widespread membership with a “we-consciousness,” a set of cohesive guiding values or ideology (identity), and clear normative expectations for social change.<sup>37</sup> The overall historical atmosphere of social change at the time, everywhere and not just in Iran, was in conformity with the classical models. The women's movement that emerged in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran and moved through various stages in the next seven decades can best be characterized as urban, elitist, and often ideological organizations and were structurally dependent on larger political parties run by males.

The movement was started by urban educated women and continued to target women in urban centers. The closer the movement was to the center, the more ideological and intellectual its activities were. The farther it went to the peripheral areas, the more charitable and health-oriented its activities became. Most female activists were urban women of upper or upper-middle class origin. The majority of these women came from families in which men were active participants in social, political, and cultural affairs. The urban and “high culture” lifestyle of these women continued to diverge sharply from those of women of lower and traditional classes, thus making it harder to create a critical mass in support of the movement. The strategies adopted by the movement also had an urban bias. Women activists often published pamphlets and magazines that were not accessible to the large number of illiterate women in rural areas. Most women's organizations were so ill defined that they could hardly command the political resources necessary for their

existence. While some were mere “paper” bodies, a few established relative wide communication networks covering several districts, towns, or cities. Given its dependence on political parties and the government, the movement lacked the autonomy and independent energy to act as a pressure group. In the face of widespread illiteracy and lack of adequate communication resources, publication and consciousness raising were appropriate means of dissemination but could not reach the majority of women in traditional households. Although certain values and normative expectations were developed by some of the better-organized associations, they did not crystallize into a unified force capable of countering the prevailing religious ideology. The issues important to the activists in the movement often differed from those advocated by the state or desired by women of lower classes. By and large, upper and upper-middle class women saw the religious ordinances as obstacles to the improvement of women’s status. Middle class women demanded mostly educational opportunities and the right to participate in social activities, while for lower class women, health, sanitation, and welfare needs were the real “women’s issues.”

One cannot underestimate the role of the state and the religious institutions in weakening the independent women’s movement in Iran. The state and religion have historically remained two sources of “value-legitimation” in Iran, each struggling to maintain a monopoly on the legitimation process. The state countered the emergence of an independent women’s movement in two ways: on the one hand, it did not tolerate any independent movement and continued to suppress autonomous activities capable of challenging its monopoly of power. Women’s demands for independent action were perceived as a political challenge to the state and a provocative issue evoking religious opposition. On the other hand, the state saw itself as the “champion” of women’s rights and was a major source of social change in the status of women in the country.<sup>38</sup> While it engineered desired changes in lives of women, it extended state power over women’s bodies and could not tolerate changes arising outside of its own control. This, in fact, complicated the task of most “feminists” and opposition forces supporting women’s rights during the Pahlavi era. If these supporters of women’s rights opposed changes proposed by the state, they were accused of siding with religious obscurantism. If they agreed with the state policies, they would find themselves on the side of a repressive state. As much as this political impasse was a reality, it was also a strategy actively used by both the state and clerics to discredit their oppositions. To change the status of women, opposition forces often find themselves forced to rely either on the state (during the Pahlavi era) or religious authorities (the Islamic feminists in the past decade in the Islamic Republic).

Another major difficulty for the supporters of the Iranian women's movement in confronting patriarchal culture and structures has been its inability to openly criticize religious values supporting patriarchy — a general problem confronting most Iranian intellectuals and politicians even today. The strength of religious sentiment in the country, especially among the rural and traditional segments of the society, along with the existence of a large number of Muslim intellectuals who believe that “genuine” Islam is supportive of women's rights, have compounded the task of open cultural debates on major national issues. Often, various organizations and feminist reformers employed religious edicts, albeit with a new interpretation favorable to their desired position, for demanding a change in the status of women. This non-confrontational strategy improved the chances of the movement for public acceptability and social legitimation. However, it also reduced its effectiveness in achieving its long run goal of equality of the sexes. By accepting the general framework of society, the movement put itself in the position of working within the very institutional framework laid down by the dominant patriarchal culture and, thus, became incapacitated in its effort to pose itself as a viable alternative.

Finally, the most paralyzing feature of the women's movement in Iran up until the revolution was its dependency on the larger movements in society. Even the early women organizations during 1890–1930 period, which maintained their autonomy from political parties and the government, still remained dependent on the general conditions created by the national struggle against foreign domination or native despotism. The movement never attained the structural allowances necessary for full realization of its potential. Dependence on the government or general political movements prevented the movement from developing its own unique identity, especially during the 1940s and 1978–81 periods.<sup>39</sup> In both of these periods, which were characterized by an increase in the number and activities of women's organizations, women's activities were organizationally too dependent on various political parties dominated by male politicians — a condition that put women in supporting roles in those organizations or as the “field hands” of the movement. As Tabari mentions, many of the women's organizations during the early years of the revolution acted as fronts for recruiting female members for the parent organizations.<sup>40</sup> It is only in post revolutionary Iran that we begin to see the re-birth of the movement with a new identity and higher degree of autonomy.<sup>41</sup>

## **The Rise of Islamic Feminism and the Re-birth of the Women's Movement**

In the first decade of the revolution, the state continued to take away the rights women had previously achieved. Women were on the defensive and

the state on the offensive. In the second decade, Iranian women went on the offensive and began to put tremendous pressure on the state to retreat. During the first decade of the revolution, the state used the war with Iraq (1980–1988) as justification for suppressing dissent and crushing active opposition. All oppositional and secular organizations, including women's, were banned. Many activists opposed to the state, both men and women, were arrested, imprisoned, and executed. Those who could manage to leave the country migrated abroad. Those who could not or did not wish to leave the country chose to either remain silent or go underground. A number of secular women activists started underground classes and consciousness-raising meetings in a very hostile anti-secular, anti-liberal, anti-Marxist environment of religious fervor.<sup>42</sup> The majority of activists concluded that organized activity was very dangerous and thus had to be used as the last resort, and only with extreme caution and adequate safeguards. A more realistic approach, more attune with the global changes taking place around the world, especially in the environmentalist movement, was generating individualistic defiance to state rules impinging on women's personal lives — a very effective strategy in a non-democratic, misogynistic state where any challenge to the legal definition of citizenship rights endangers life and property of the individual. These forms of resistance included non-confrontational strategies for undermining the state's power and diluting state dress codes and public appearance requirements.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, new alliances emerged and groups pressed the state for changes in social and legal policies affecting women. These efforts became more pronounced after the presidential election of 1997 when Moḥammad Khatami, with massive support from women and youth, was elected as the president. Many Muslim women who had participated in the war activities and had cooperated closely with the state came to the realization that the ruling clerics' promises of equality at the beginning of the revolution had not come true. A group of liberal Muslim female activists were able to see for themselves that the policies advocated by the Islamic Republic represented "patriarchy in Islamic clothing."<sup>43</sup> They, along with secular women, began to problematize the equalitarian verses of Qur'an and *hadiths* (statements by prophets and imams) and question the monopoly of interpretation of these texts by male jurists<sup>44</sup> — an argument developed by Islamic feminists in other continents as well.<sup>45</sup> These women, working in different arenas and with varied voices and tactics, cleverly used the conflict between various political factions within the clerical establishment to their advantage by pitting one set of religious interpretation of texts against the other, one faction of ulama against the other, and lay intellectuals against the clerics. They questioned

prevailing gender segregation, unequal division of labor, widespread domestic violence, and the organizational and exploitative biases within the Iranian Islamic family. Becoming visible and demanding across the social and political spectrum, especially in media and politics, these women focused on the tensions, conflicts, and inequalities hidden within relationships in Islamic society. To look for opportunities within a misogynistic state, women focused on “their basic rights, security against the unyielding forces of fanaticism, and dignity in face of two decades of assaults on their identity and status.”<sup>46</sup>

While there has not been a homogeneous women's movement in the classical definition of the term, in the Islamic Republic, there has been a rise in women's activities in various sectors of society. What has happened in Iran can be described as a creeping change, much like what happened to women seeking the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the United States. The ERA failed but women's penetration into the labor market, educational arena, entertainment industry, and politics brought them gains much greater in scope than those hoped for by the drafters of the ERA. In Iran too, despite the institutional barriers put in place by the Islamic Republic in cultural and interactional domains, women have pushed the imposed boundaries further out and made concerted efforts to penetrate various professions in the public arena, especially in the film industry, literary works, and mass media.

Although women's participation in the labor force has not made much progress from that of the past decade (12.1 percent during 1987–1997), the female occupational profile has changed dramatically. Women are now found in commercial, industrial, educational, agricultural, cultural, political, and entertainment sectors. Given that electoral rights have been achieved, women are focused on equal opportunities in and access to leadership and executive positions, both in government and industry. In 2001, the same year, there were 500,000 employed women who either managed their own businesses or supervised other employees.<sup>47</sup> Women's achievements in education have surpassed men's on many levels and in many positions. In the first decade of the revolution, enrollment in girl's primary schools had a 50 percent increase. Today, 60 percent of girls of 15–18 years age are attending high schools. In 1998, 51 percent, and in 1999, 57 percent of students entering universities were females (only 25 percent prior to the revolution).<sup>48</sup> The literacy rate among women is up to 80 percent. In 1945, only 1.0 percent of employed men and women had graduate degrees. In 2001, this number increased to 22 percent for women, and only to 7 percent for men. In the political sphere, women have opened more space for themselves. In local council elections in 1998, 297 women were elected to city councils and 484 to rural councils. In the social arena, women have had the biggest gains by becoming active in the

entertainment industry, journalism, and literary fields. There are 13 women's magazines publishing at the national level (*Neda*, *Payam-e Zan*, *Payam-e Haajar*, *Zane Rooz*, *Farzaneh*, *Nameh-ye Zan*, *Nesa*, *Shahed-e Baanovaan*, *Al-Mahjoobeh*, *Al-Tabereh*, *Hoqooqe Zanaan*, *Jense Dovom*, and *Zanan*) and numerous smaller ones in small towns and local areas. There are four student magazines published by university students (*Zanaane Daanesbjoo*, *Morghhe Sabar*, *Sabar*, and *Rastaaraan*). There are three feminist magazines published on the internet (*Zanaan dar Iran*, *Zanaan*, *Bad Jens*).

All groups of women, Islamicist or secular, skilled or unskilled, educated or uneducated, and old or young have begun to show a higher level of awareness to their conditions and to demand more control over the processes of their daily living, their relations with their parents, husbands, children, and men outside of their kin. This awareness, and its subsequent activism, are aimed at ameliorating women's social conditions, denouncing violence against women, resisting repressive policies of the state, and opposing discriminatory laws affecting women's lives.<sup>49</sup>

While the strategy of women's groups in pre-revolutionary periods was based on participation in a general social movement against the state, as expressed in anti-government demonstrations in the late 1970s and early 80s, the strategy adopted by women activists in the post-Khomeini period involves accommodation, negotiation, and resistance. These strategies are gradual, incremental, and penetrative. Women activists "move in diffused directions, focus on incremental gains, empower local groups, and aim for smaller but sustainable changes. They are concerned with tangible issues affecting their lives, such as the right of divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Suspicious of the 'vanguardism' and 'practical rigidity' of leftist and nationalist movements of earlier periods,<sup>50</sup> post-revolutionary women's activism has a 'self-reflective' dimension through which women become active agents in their own lives by recurring and reinterpreting the imposed structures and relationships.<sup>51</sup> Women are less committed to totalizing ideologies, grand theories, and broad organizations. Instead, they devote more of their political energies to the localization of global values that remove parochial obstacles to their growth, preserve their identities and dignity against the assaults by the restrictive gender policies of the state, and prepare a taller stand from which they will make their next move."<sup>52</sup> For instance, ceaseless complaints by women against the custody laws have not changed the religious laws governing custody. However, it has forced the state to make enough room for women to reduce the negative effects of these laws. In 1985, the parliament passed a bill giving the right of fostership of a minor to the mother, if the mother is deemed competent by the court. Recently, women parliamentarians were able to

convince their male colleagues to pass a bill equalizing the pension for male and female retirees.<sup>53</sup> Currently, a major effort is underway by women activists, both inside and outside of the state, to have the Islamic Republic join the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

There is greater individualism in the current women's activism than has existed anytime before in the past century — an attitude grounded in and fostered by the globalizing forces of modernity. The state's efforts for imposing a collectivist identity on Iranian women backfired and gave rise to a desire to find a balance between the extremes of Western individualism and Islamic collectivism. More and more women are trying to de-couple their identity from group affiliations (i.e., religion, family, and ethnicity) to individual definitions based on their own achievements. A more pronounced aspect of this attitude has shown itself in less interest in totalistic ideologies, political power, and revolution among women activists. Liberal Muslim women, even those with Islamic revolutionary credentials, are very pragmatic about changes in Islamic laws regarding women's status. While some of them avoid the label "feminist" for the stated reason that Islam offers them their full rights and no external ideology is needed for restoration of their God-given rights, some others do so due to political expediency.<sup>54</sup>

Secular women have become concerned about control over the definition of their identities and their bodies as ideological battlegrounds in the Islamic Republic, and the structures conditioning their lives. In response to the government's rules for hiding their physical and social identities, secular women have creatively devised strategies for peeling off the layers of physical and ideological covers imposed on them. As one Iranian woman has observed, "Lipstick is not just lipstick in Iran. It transmits a political message. It is a weapon."<sup>55</sup> In a study of divorce in Iran, Zib Mir-Hosseini shows how women manipulate the law, the court, and their facts in order to reduce the negative effects of religious laws on themselves at the time of divorce.<sup>56</sup>

Issues and interests energizing the new Iranian women's movement are nuanced and varied. They include a greater awareness of human rights, individual rights, individual autonomy within marriage, family independence within the kinship network, and a form of national consciousness against the global diffusion of modern values. The movement can be best characterized as "collective action without actors."<sup>57</sup> It has gained the capacity to retransmit the domination of the state's own contradictions by reversing its imposed codes of meanings, subject imposed boundaries to pressures and inevitably contraction, and expose the restrictive nature of state laws by personal declaration of their cruelty through various mediums available to women.

As a new social movement, the current movement lacks the necessary ingredients of the classical social movements, such as clearly defined goals and direction, strong leadership, and necessary organizations. However, despite the lack of coordination between different forms of women's activism in different sectors of society, thus little predictability associated with them, the gradual and evolutionary effects of these activities on both women and the Islamic state are undeniable. On the government's part, this social activism has increased the cost of its social control, requiring higher energy and social investment at a time of declining effectiveness in policy and lower compliance by women. By effectively de-legitimizing state gender ideology, the movement has reduced state control mechanisms to the use of violence. Many legitimization tools used by the state in the 1980s have become ineffective. On women's parts, their higher self-consciousness and self-activity has resulted in a penetrating change in the public's attitudes towards women, especially within the government and media. Women's activism, empowered by a higher level of awareness and access to education and modern technology, has put tremendous pressure on the Islamic state to ease up on its control and restrictions.

The past dependency of women's activism on male organization has been replaced by a highly confident attitude and determination to fight this battle for women's rights mostly by women themselves. Despite efforts by dominant religious intellectuals in Iran and Islamic feminists,<sup>58</sup> women activists rely on women for fighting male domination and patriarchal structure rather than on men.<sup>59</sup> The past experiences of depending on men, political parties, and the prior success of national struggles against dictatorship and imperialism have proven to be ineffective for achieving women's emancipation. Change through executive order has been precarious and often undesired. Women are fighting hard through NGOs and civil society organizations to build steps necessary for climbing to the height of their strength and demands. Now, women are forming their own organizations, forums, and groups, away and separate from men's organizations. "These organizations, groupings, and collective endeavors allow them to discuss universal and national issues from their own particularistic perspective so that their specific concerns receive focused attention. Working in all-women organizations may reinforce the separatist policies of the IRI, but is an effective strategy in a traditional society with sensitivity to male-female interactions. First, it makes it much easier for women activists to establish communication and interact with traditional women, who are less comfortable mixing with secular women. Second, it provides a shield against the government's suspicion against women's participation in organized activities outside of the home. Third, it helps to gain the support and cooperation of religious female activists who do not wish to cross the prescribed religious interactional boundaries.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the current movement is broad but uncoordinated. It is broad because it includes activities of women all over the country and in almost all sectors of society: secular, religious, modern, and traditional.<sup>60</sup> Some women have discovered the potential power of traditional formations for achieving modern objectives.<sup>61</sup> Religious circles, gatherings for holidays, athletic and sports gatherings, musical concerts, and mountain-climbing get-togethers have all been used as venues for exchanging ideas and meeting with other activists.

In the public sphere, women are pushing for space in city councils, parliament, ministries, and mid-ranking to executive positions in economic organizations. Moreover, the politicization of women's positions in Iran, by both the Islamic government and its opposition, transforms every action taken for or against women into a new social energy for further change. Given the wide spectrum of women's activities and focused demands on the state, the interaction between the state and women has become a major source of change in the country. However, despite the broad spectrum of women's activism, the movement is diffuse and uncoordinated. Different sectors of the movement pave the way for the activities of the other sectors without any direct coordination. For instance, cultural and legal activities of secular women, such as those of Shirian Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kar, Shahla Lahiji and Simin Behbahani, created grass root demands that in turn gave direction to the political agenda of religious women working within the system. Many of the issues targeted for legislative change by female parliamentarians had been debated in the publications and forums of secular and Islamic feminists. These uncoordinated activities have a high rate of iteration, multiplying each other's effect across a wide spectrum of the social scene.

## Endnotes

1. See Nateq, Homa, "Negaahi be Barkhi Neveshteh-haa va Mobaarezaate Zanaan dar Duraane Mashrootiyat," *Ketaabe Jom'eh*, No. 30, 1979: 45–54.
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6. For an excellent account of the rise of feminism in Iran, see Afary, Janet, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911; Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origin of Feminism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

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17. Yaukacheva, 1959.
18. Sanasarian, 1982: 73.
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21. Afkhami, Mahnaz, “Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Feminist Perspective,” in M. Afkhami and Erika Friedl (eds.), *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 14.
22. Paidar, Parvin, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 118–147.
23. Jahani, Maryam, “Jaayegaah Zanaan dar Bakhsh-e Eqtesaadiye Keshvar,” (Women’s Status in the Economic Sector), *Hoqooqe Zanan*, Mehr and Aban, 1379.
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26. Kar, Mehrangiz, *Hoqooqe Siyaasi-ye Zanaane Iran* (Political Rights of Iranian Women), (Tehran: Roshangaran & Women Studies Publishing), 1376.
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29. For a discussion of leftist women see Shahidian, Hamed, “Zanaan va Mashye Siyaasiye Makhfi dar Iran, 1970–1985,” (Women and Secret Political Activism in Iran), *Avaye Zan*, No. 30, Autumn, 1997. Also, Higgins, Patricia J., “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 31: 477–494.
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32. A look at employment data shows that in 1335 there were 573,000 employed women in the country. This increased to 1,212,000 (14 percent of labor force) in 1355 (two years before the revolution). After the revolution, this number first declined to 975,000 (8.9 percent) in 1365, and then picked up to 1,765,000 (12.1 percent) in 1375. See, Jahani, Maryam, 1379. In a different table, Behnaz Movahedi reports these numbers as follows: 12.5 percent in 1345, 12.9 percent in 1355, 8.2 percent in 1365, 8.7 percent 1370, 9.1 percent 1375, 11.7 percent 1378. See Behnaz Movahedi, "Chaalsh-haaye Eshteqaale Zanaan dar Iran," (The challenges of Women's Employment in Iran), *Hoqooqe Zanan*, No. 21, Farvardin, 1381.

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University Press, 1998) and Nayereh Tohidi, "Islamic Feminism: A Democratic Challenge or a Theocratic Reaction?" *Kankash*, No. 13, 1997.

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49. *Ibid.*

50. See Haideh Moghissi, 1994.

51. Kar, Mehrangiz.

52. Mahdi, 2003, *Ibid.*: 67.

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54. See my interview with Azam Taleqani, "The First Woman Candidate for President; An Interview with Azam Taleghani," *Pazbhvak*, No. 59, October 1997; and the declaration by the parliamentarian Fatema Rakei, that female Muslim activists should not be called "feminists," *Zanan*, August 2000: 71. For a more nativistic approach to feminism by Muslim women, see Motie, Nahid. "Feminizm dar Iran: dar Jostejoye yek Rahyaafte Boomi," (Feminism in Iran: In Search of Native Solution), *Zanan*, No. 33, Farvardin 1376.

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58. Although the Islamic feminists have been successful in putting pressures on religious male authorities for offering less rigid interpretation of Islamic laws, they have never been able to challenge the law itself or the right of male theologians in establishing those laws. Religious intellectuals, like secular intellectuals in pre-revolutionary period, keep emphasizing the primacy of citizenry rights over "women's rights." Abbas Abdi and Emadeddin Baqi express these views in an interview with *Zanan*, No. 58, November 1999. A recent interview by Mahtab Rahimi with a reformist, Ebrahim Asgharzadeh is also revealing, see *Zanan dar Iran*, Internet Magazine ([www.womeniniran.com](http://www.womeniniran.com)). See For a discussion of reformist views on women, see Farideh Farhi, "Religious Intellectuals, the 'Woman Question,' and the Struggle for the Creation of a Democratic Public Sphere in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* Vol. 15, No. 2, January 2001: 315–339.

59. For example, look at Hamidreza Jalaipour, "Ekhtelaate Maf-hoome Feminizm baa Jonbeshe Zanaan, baa eshaareh be Iran," (The difference between feminism and women's movement, with a reference to Iran) *Nuorooz*, No. 27, *Kbordad* 1381.

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