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Ali-Akbar Mahdi
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

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WOMEN OF IRAN: A BIBLIOGRAPHY
OF SOURCES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Ali-Akbar Mahdi
Department of Sociology
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

To speak of women's position in Iran, in a short introduction such as this, is fraught with many difficulties. It involves generalizations which are not immune from historical and empirical fallacies. Nevertheless, at the risk of oversimplification, it should be possible to present a general description of the situation of women in Iran.

Recent anthropological studies have demonstrated that women's subordination, though varying in form and degree, has been and unfortunately still is, a universal phenomenon. Iran is no exception. While 25 centuries of Iranian history have recorded different historical modes of material life, they have documented essentially a specific pattern of political structure. This structure can be characterized as conforming, somewhat, to Max Weber's ideal type of patrimonial authority. Patrimonial political

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to take the opportunity to express my appreciation to my wife, Nina Sansami, for her patience and support. Dora Ludwick also deserves special thanks for her invaluable comments.

structure partially developed out of and along with patriarchal superstructure. Therefore, patrimonialism, by nature, has been a system of patriarchy. Patriarchal domination has been backed by male control of political, economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions of society.

While having its own dynamics, patriarchal domination in Iran has been interlocked with the forms of economic production. While Islam has granted women the right to property, in accord with the dominant productive relations of Iranian society, Iranian women have often been excluded from ownership and/or control of resources. Thus, they have had very limited access to and control over the means of production. Consequently, they have enjoyed a minimal control over the fruits of their labor as well as of the social surplus. With rare exceptions, women have been barred from legitimate positions of power and influence.

The productive organization of Iranian society has provided men with a great deal of control over the labor of their children and wives. By producing subsistence foodstuffs and by reproducing the labor force through child-bearing and child-raising, women have contributed a great deal to the process of capital accumulation and capitalist development in Iran. Peripheral capitalist accumulation in Iran has benefited highly from unpaid labor of rural women and underpaid labor of urban working women.

Generally rural women have been relatively more present in production than urban women because historically they have been active participants of the farm families' production activities for centuries. The urban women, however, have usually been denied active and constant participation in the production process. After the Iranian land reform, which was implemented in 1963, the rural population was removed and pushed to the cities. Here the rural women became marginal workers in the most downtrodden and underpaid sections of the labor force. Many of these women became household maids doing dull chores for wealthy families in order to raise their own families' income. These women, along with other underclass women in the urban areas, were torn by the conflicting responsibilities of caring for their own children while at the same time working outside the home to help sustain their families. These women workers were usually treated disrespectfully. Also, their wages were lower than men's with similar qualifications working in similar jobs.

It is no exaggeration to say that, by and large, Iranian women of all classes have usually been viewed as "housemaids," even if they work outside the home. Household work has been defined as the appropriate sphere for women. The majority of them have been confined to the house. This seclusion has deprived women of direct access to the material and social resources in the society, thus, creating a condition


of extreme socio-economic dependence on men.

Since traditionally women have assumed a great deal of responsibility for matters relevant to household and family, the activities associated with these matters were incorporated into women's roles in the society in general. Even when some women did finally leave the seclusion of the household venturing into positions in the tertiary sector, due to changes in legal measures concerning divorce and family protection and voting rights, the activities of the household still stereotyped them. Thus, they were usually characterized as specialists in the "art" of child-bearing, child-caring, child-raising, and in providing love and affection to family members.6

These distorted conclusions have usually been developed on the basis of biological differences supported by patriarchal ideology. This is represented in educational curriculum, societal beliefs and traditions, religion, and so on, which socialize children to believe that each sex has a particular function to fulfill in the society. The discriminatory and dominating nature of this ideology was concealed in the explanation (read "rationalization") given: since men and women are biologically different, they are to be assigned different tasks and different rights(). On this basis, women have been socialized to believe that they are privileged to remain within the restricted sphere of the house. This


6) See the interview with Abram Hariri, one of the delegations from the Islamic Republic of Iran in the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, Copenhagen, Forum 80, July 16, 1980. A print version of this interview is published in Farsh, 1980.

type of ideology confused "equality with identity and diversity with inequality". Such reasoning is blind to the fact that "...diversity is a biological fact, while equality is a political, ethical, and social precept," and there "...is no rule of nature or of social organization that says men and women have to be the same or do the same things in order to be socially, economically, and politically equal."8

Iranian patriarchal structure was and still is maintained and perpetuated not only by substructural factors, but by superstructural factors such as political, religious, and cultural ideologies. One of the most serious factors contributing to the continuation of the exploitative and oppressive conditions of Iranian women has been the existence of false self-images and ideological rationalizations provided by the ruling belief systems. These beliefs, wrapped in ideological foils, are usually accepted, internalized, and reproduced by the women themselves. They are anchored in the character structure of the women. One of the most important social agents through which this has been done is the family. Family is the most crucial institution in the reproduction of subordinate/superordinate social relationships. It has a specific role in the reproduction of unequal sexual relationships and hierarchical social relationships.

The above considerations have characterized the general status of women in Iran. But is this still


8) Ibid.
true today? Iran has gone through a political revolution which has asserted itself in Islamic form. What have these changes brought for the advancement of women's situation in the society? Has the revolution fulfilled its own promises in regard to women?

The Iranian Islamic revolution has had a contradictory effect on the conditions of women in Iran. The leadership of the revolution defined the revolution almost exclusively in religious terms, believing that Islam would bring with it a better and fulfilling economy, polity, culture, and human development for both men and women. But this has not been the case completely. The revolution has created conflicting attitudes, trends and effects. While millions of women were mobilized and motivated to take part in the political processes, the political demands of the more educated women for voluntary and active presence in the socio-political scene was rejected. While the traditional Iranian women have become more conscious that the positions to which they have hitherto been confined are unjustly subservient, they have become inclined to define female activism and political participation solely in religious terms. The more conscious, educated, and secularized women are being demobilized and pushed back from high ranking and sensitive positions in the society. Meanwhile, thousands of religious women, who in the past were discouraged from leaving their private domain by religious leaders, are now actively present in the military, social and political arenas. But, these "fired" women are confined to certain tasks and are expected to participate in social life in a prescribed manner. Certain jobs, such as in the judiciary, are denied to women while certain others, such as typing, weaving, dressmaking, and hairdressing, are officially characterized as "women's jobs." Women are ordered back to the veil.

They have gained full right to vote (as a matter of fact, this right was legally granted to women in the pre-revolutionary regime but its implementation was never encouraged) but are being held back from key public offices. In public places religious leaders demand that secluded areas be reserved for women. While the Shah's propaganda machine projected the image of a woman as a beautiful 'play object', in present-day Iran they are being portrayed as a "mother subject".

What do all these "gains and losses" mean for the future of Iranian women? It is hard to answer this question because the position of women in contemporary Iran is in a state of flux. Women have gained a great deal from the recent changes, but they have had some losses too. They are still searching for their self-identity, trying various roles. They have moved beyond the stage of defining their freedom simply in terms of women's suffrage or participation in the demonstrations orchestrated by male leaders. They are asking for an equal share in decision-making and policy-making. They are marching ahead with a knapsack of first-hand revolutionary experiences. They are not going to sit back and take orders anymore.

But, we should not lose sight of the fact that Iranian women are divided today too. While the old ruling class women, who were the focus of the old regime for its ill-devised and ill-intentioned policies towards women, are pushed out of the mainstream, the class distinctions among active women claiming the right of participation in socio-economic affairs are blurred. This is because of the political, and to a very limited extent, economic changes caused by the recent revolution. New alliances are emerging while old forms of cooperation and coalitions
are vanishing. Meanwhile, new contradictions are emerging which divide formerly united fronts that stood together in the fight against the tyrannical rule of the Shah. Secular-oriented women of all classes perceive their rights and define their situation quite differently from the dominant religious-oriented women. The two are separated by different cosmologies, ideological, and orientations. But while the former is more tolerant of other outlooks, the latter is less tolerant and has tried to impose its own way of living on the more secular women, thus deterring their ability to be united.

Still, there are differences and contradictions within each camp. Both religious and secular-oriented women are divided into two groups. In each camp, one group subscribes to a progressive and democratic perspective about the situation of women, while the other to a conservative and traditional worldview about women's role in the society. What the outcome of this fluid situation will be is not now clear and cannot be determined without a further understanding of the larger contradictions in the society. The resolution of these contradictions among women will definitely depend on the resolution of larger class, ethnic, cultural, and political contradictions of post-revolutionary Iran.

The subordination of Iranian women, while a distinct issue, is not unrelated to the subordination of all the members of society, men and women, by the oppressive institutional structures. Many of the inequities experienced by the Iranian people are related to the structural factors such as political, social, and economic underdevelopment and oppression created by imperialist powers with the help of their affiliated local classes. Until these inhibiting conditions are alleviated, no true advancement in the position of Iranian men or women is expected.

Therefore, emancipation of women cannot be seen as the only goal for women. Both men and women should continue their battle against the oppressive and exploitative social structures in order for both to reach their common humanity. Patriarchy and class inequality are mutually reinforcing structures of power. The elimination of both requires a strategy based on an understanding of the unique dynamics of each as well as their common articulation.

The full emancipation of Iranian women may be a long-term project, but it is something not to be postponed until after the societal emancipation. History abounds with cases in which the societal transformations and freedom from exploitative class systems have not brought about the total liberation of women. Women should wage their specific struggle, a struggle that does not run counter to broader struggle but widens and enriches it. Furthermore, Iranian women should not perceive their struggle for liberation only as a national issue. The oppression of men and women under capitalism is a global phenomenon. Iran is a country with a dependent capitalist economy built into the structure of the world capitalist system. Iranian women should globalize their outlook and carry their struggle against social, political, economic, sexual, racial, national, and international inequalities and injustices.

As current socio-economic as well as sexual contradictions intensify in post-revolutionary Iranian society, it is becoming increasingly apparent that studies of sexual inequality and oppression of Iranian women are needed. These studies will help give coherence and accuracy to the understanding of the kinds of problems that are being posed by the new revolutionary situation in Iran and to the questions that are being asked about the role of women.
in that society. Iranian women have been unfairly neglected in the literature of the social sciences. There exist no nationally based historico-theoretical studies of women's situation in Iranian society. There are very few analytical studies dealing exclusively with women's oppression in Iran.

Most studies listed in this bibliography are either descriptive accounts or are only secondarily concerned with women. Many of these listed works represent studies in cultural anthropology, social demography, sociology of family and kinship, rural sociology, and so on. Their inclusion in this list is not accidental. They were chosen because they have some bearing on the study of women. They either contain relevant information and statistical data or their conclusions have certain implications for the position of Iranian women.

The emphasis on statistical information is very important because not only is there a lack of a theoretical framework for research on the conditions of women in Iran, but also our understanding of their situation is paralyzed by the lack of any empirical data on the status of women in the social structure and economic organization of that society. Studies of this nature are very important and necessary because they not only help us understand the nature and scope of sexual inequality, but they also help us identify the critical determinants of this inequality and help provide the knowledge needed for initiating change.

Finally, there are many papers written on Iranian women presented at different national or international meetings. I decided deliberately not to include the citations of these papers because I have found, through personal experience, that these kinds of papers are very difficult to obtain. Although their listing may have the positive effect of informing other scholars, it may also create expectations in the reader which are frustrated when they are unsuccessful in obtaining the papers.

It is hoped that this attempt will provide a modest basis for future efforts in studying the conditions of Iranian women. Minimally, the bibliography should prove to be useful to those making comparative studies of women around the world as well as to those attempting to achieve a broader understanding of the state of women in Iranian society.

These then, are my views about the position of Iranian women. It is my commitment to their cause which leads me to undertake this project.

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"The deteriorating situation of the Palestinian school system in Israel is the intentional result of Israel's educational policy for Palestinian citizens. Education in Israel is segregated from the kindergarten all the way up to the high school. Only the universities have some semblance of integration. The Palestinian educational system is thus motivated and guided by a separate educational policy. This 'educational policy' was designed not to create educated Palestinians but to produce semi-skilled workers to do the jobs Israeli Jews choose to avoid. The Israeli authorities thus were able to kill two birds with one stone. They checked the rise of a literate, nationally conscious indigenous Palestinian leadership and they created a convenient 'trigger' labor pool to how the stones and fetch the water necessary to build the 'Jewish State.'" AJME News (Americans for Justice in the Middle East), VT, No.6 (March 1981), pp. 8-9. P.O.Box 113-5981, Beirut, Lebanon.